

The Goodness of God Week 4
The Wisdom of God

Our readings this week are both concerned with *wisdom*, and how God's wisdom might differ from our own.

Our first reading presents a persistent idea found in the Old Testament and through Jewish and Christian history: that the righteous and wise will be rewarded by God while sinners and the foolish will be punished. It is part of a wider Jewish literature on wisdom, in which wisdom is sometimes spoken of as a quality of God, and at other times (as in Proverbs) is almost spoken of as a separate person. Curiously, passages about wisdom in the Book of Proverbs played a role in encouraging Jews to think of Jesus as the Logos or Word (cf. John 1), as it provided precedent for someone or something that could be both fully God and distinct from God at the same time.

Both the Book of Job and the work of the prophets, however, had cast doubt on a *direct* connection between wisdom and righteousness and success, and Jesus' life raised this issue to a new and decisive level. For if God had saved the world through *the Cross*, something that no one in their right mind would ever have chosen, then clearly God thinks about things in a way very different to us. His ways - and his wisdom - are not our own.

Our second passage is Paul's contribution to this line of thought, and forms part of his rich teaching on the significance of the Cross. While at its most basic level the message of the Cross is that God took flesh and died on the Cross to free us from sin, judgement and spiritual death, it is also much wider than this. Among other things, Paul sees the Cross as the ultimate example of:

- God's love for us
- God's mastery over the devil (his attempted murder of God became the moment of his greatest defeat)
- God's triumph over death (a person who can't be killed but is instead resurrected cannot be defeated)
- God's redemption of human suffering from within (Jesus has experienced suffering and death but brought life and joy from it)
- God's superiority over all governments and all physical force (they were incapable of executing Jesus who showed himself to be in control of them instead)
- (Most importantly for this week) That the glory and power of God are best displayed in *weakness* (if we have all the glory, power and wisdom the God has no 'space' in which to act, yet when we have nothing God's glory, power and wisdom can shine through us)

It's in the context of this wider teaching that Paul rejoices in the ludicrousness and sheer wonder that God would choose an executed criminal from a despised race of people to save the world, and even better, that he would spread the world through ordinary, uneducated people who have no special intellectual or rhetorical gifts.

In that last aspect, however, Paul is pulling a few rhetorical tricks in this passage. The background to this is that Paul was - famously - not a great public speaker. Some scholars even think he may have had a stutter. Yet God entrusted a man with poor speaking skills to be his apostle to the non-Jewish (Gentile) world. God had a sense of humour! Yet Paul is also drawing a contrast in this passage between his (not great) public speaking and his (really quite good) writing. This text - concerned with how poor and unappealing the message of the Cross is - is rhetorically rich and dramatic. Even in translation, you gain a sense of its rhythm and passion and drama and zeal for God's glory. In classic Paul style, he is being both humble and boastful at the same time - all to make the point that he himself isn't worth anything, but that God is worthy of all.

Following on from Sunday's sermon, then, our passages draw a contrast between the 'wisdom' of two trees: the Tree of Life (mentioned in the first passage), and the Tree of the Cross (mentioned in the second). For some, the only 'attractive' and 'sensible' tree is the former, while the other is to be avoided. Yet Paul knows the truth - that the Cross is the *true* Tree of Life, as it is through this tree that we win eternal life. Sometimes we experience this Tree in bloom, and sometimes we experience it bare and bloody. Yet it is *the same* Tree, and those who cling to it through every season shall be saved.

Proverbs 3: 5-18

- ⁵ Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
- ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
- ⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.
- ⁸ It will be a healing for your flesh
and a refreshment for your body.
- ⁹ Honour the Lord with your substance
and with the first fruits of all your produce;
- ¹⁰ then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.
- ¹¹ My child, do not despise the Lord's discipline
or be weary of his reproof,
- ¹² for the Lord reproves the one he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights.
- ¹³ Happy are those who find wisdom,
and those who get understanding,
- ¹⁴ for her income is better than silver,
and her revenue better than gold.
- ¹⁵ She is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.
- ¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honour.
- ¹⁷ Her ways are ways of pleasantness,

and all her paths are peace.

¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy.

1. What do you think it means, in practice, to trust in the Lord, and not in your own understanding? Is there a time in your life when you did something like this?
2. Our reading from Proverbs seems to connect trusting in the Lord and obeying his commandments with worldly success. Can you think of some ways in which living a Christian life might help you in material ways?

1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

3. Our first reading says that God desires us to seek wisdom, while our second reading says that God will destroy the wisdom of the wise? What do you think is going on here?
4. What do you think non-Christians think of when they think of the Cross? What, if anything, do they think the Cross means?
5. If ‘the message of the Cross’ is the key to wisdom and salvation, what lesson do you think Paul wants us to learn?
6. Activity. Draw a cross on a piece of paper. On the left side of the cross, write down what a ‘wise’ life for Jesus would have been according to the logic of the world. Then, on the right side, write down what he believed a wise life looked like. Once you’ve done this for Jesus, do the same for your own life. What do you or others usually think a wise or successful life looks like? What would it look like if you followed the wisdom of God and not your own?