

HOLY CROSS DAY

Why didn't he run away? He could've gone back up north, to Galilee. He could've set up shop in a sleepy, anonymous hill village, run a profitable carpenter's business, got married, had children and settled down. In a few months, it would all have blown over. Today's news; tomorrow's Galilean chip-paper. He could've enjoyed a pleasant old age, telling his grandchildren about the time when he was nearly famous.

But he was so stubborn. His mind was made up and there was no changing it. Not even Peter could sow a seed of doubt. He had set his sights on Jerusalem. He must've known there was trouble brewing. He must've guessed that he'd be for it this time. You can't go around offending powerful people at will. But that never seemed to bother him. The Truth always seemed more important than keeping up with the Cohens.

He was a man driven. He simply had to get to Jerusalem for Passover. It was as if he was playing out a scene on the stage of his enemies, whilst insisting upon using his own script, and speaking his own lines. Jesus' road to the Cross appeared to be mapped out. It seemed to be one of those 'meant to be' moments of history.

In Philippians, St Paul describes Christ's emptying of himself, generally in the Incarnation, but more specifically in the Crucifixion. In verse 8 of chapter 2 he wrote, "*Being found in appearance as a man, he (Christ) humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.*"

To Paul's generation, the notion that God redeems humankind by a crucified saviour would have appeared foolish beyond words; it was a direct contradiction of accepted ideas of wisdom and power.

Theologian, Morna Hooker, is correct when she observes: "*Our problem is simply that we are too used to the Christian story; it is*

difficult for us to grasp the absurdity – indeed, the sheer madness – of the gospel about a crucified saviour which was proclaimed by the first Christians in a world where the cross was the most barbaric form of punishment which men could devise.”

You might be familiar with a well-known piece of graffiti scratched on a first century Roman wall. It depicts a boy, with one hand raised in an attitude of worship, in front of a crucified figure with the body of a man and the head of an ass. Beneath the crude caricature, the artist teases his friend by scribbling the following inscription – *Alexamenos theov sebetai* (Alexamenos worships his god).

First century Jews and Greeks had very good reasons not to welcome the apostolic proclamation with open minds and willing hearts. Their respective world views were resistant to the Gospel message.

The Jews were a matter-of-fact people; they had little interest in speculative thought. Their demand was for practical evidence; a revelation of God’s presence by powerful signs. Miracles would be proof of the advent of the Messiah, whom the Jews believed would appear as a politically-powerful, liberating military commander.

Given such an understanding, it’s not difficult to appreciate why belief in a crucified, martyred Messiah was a contradiction in terms for the Jew on a Capernaum camel! It suggested vulnerability, humiliation and ultimate defeat. Indeed, the method by which Jesus of Nazareth was executed exacerbated Jewish scepticism. The Torah (Deuteronomy 21.23) declared, “*Anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse.*” Although this verse originally applied to the display of a corpse, the interpretation was later applied to the gruesome Roman method of execution. Paul’s impeccable ethnic, religious, and academic background made him acutely aware that the preaching of a crucified Messiah would have been a *skandalon* (stumbling-block) to his fellow Jews.

By contrast, the Greeks sought to know God through rational argument. They demanded intellectual principles, patterns of reasoning and systems of philosophy. These spiralling conceptions of speculative wisdom ultimately ascended the summit of *gnosis* (knowledge of the Divine). It's easy to understand why the Greek mind couldn't view the account of a crucified deity as being anything other than the zenith of folly.

A Greek in the Philippian *agora* or market-place could simply not conceive of a divine-man who lacked the intelligence, wit or wisdom to avoid so humiliating and horrific a death. Crucifixion was capital punishment for slaves and vanquished enemies. To proclaim what was already a shame as God's chosen means of salvation was to add insult to offence.

St Paul argued in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 that the Jews and the Greeks were using the wrong criteria in assessing the saving work of God in Christ. In verses 24 and 25, the Apostle used rhetoric to claim that God subverted conventional notions of wisdom, authority and value in the first century Judaeo-Graeco-Roman world. And he deliberately chose to do this by the startling paradox of a crucified man exalted as the Lord Almighty. *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”* (St John 3.14f)

For Paul, to enter the symbolic world of the Gospel is to undergo a radical conversion of the imagination. To see all worldly values transformed by the foolish and weak death of Jesus on the Cross. The crucifixion unmasked the underlying assumptions of the Jews and the Greeks; the sceptical materialism of the former and the philosophical reasoning of the latter.

What about our world today? Is the Cross of Christ still foolishness to our generation and in our culture? I want to suggest that the challenges faced by Paul in the pre-Christian Graeco-Roman world

are matched, if not surpassed by the challenges we face in the post-Christian West. We live in a time of decline in institutional Christianity, but ironically, in our country today, there is also huge interest in *spirituality*. With religious activity no longer perceived as duty, it is now viewed as a leisure pursuit. A consumerist model has emerged of people shopping around for their spiritual needs. Sociologist Grace Davie aptly describes religion in post-war Britain as *believing without belonging*.

In this climate, emerging generations have very little foundation in Christian values, 'church culture' and Bible stories. The Christian *metanarrative* focussing upon the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ has increasingly become marginalised in our postmodern culture. As a consequence, a gradual, intellectual transition is being made from historic Christianity to indifference and, ultimately, to unbelief. Sadly, many now see secular humanism as religion 'come of age' – Christianity without the need for the institutional Church and its archaic supernaturalism. Give me the Romans, Greeks and Jews of the first century any day!

However, brothers and sisters, we must not lose our nerve! The Cross of Christ continues to stand proud at the heart of Christian believing. Like the little boy who dared to declare the Emperor's nakedness, the Cross questions the practices of contemporary culture and upturns the values of our world. It undermines our trust in money and power as solutions to our problems; it deflates our confidence in utopian scientific progress; and it frustrates our desire to justify retaliation and the use of violence. In an age of self-indulgent communication and manic busyness, the 'fool's wisdom' of the Gospel challenges us to slow down, to reflect and to make the journey inwards. Throughout Christian history and across diverse international communities, the Cross has had the power to melt stubborn hearts, to enliven dulled minds, to cleanse guilty consciences and to articulate a response to human suffering.

You see, ultimately, the darkness and the brokenness of the Cross is the only authentic response which the Christian faith can offer for the darkness and brokenness of the world. It is the power of God to redeem, to reconcile and to restore, and through the resurrection it points to humankind's ultimate destiny. The Cross lies at the heart of God's Good News. We can turn our backs on it, we can ridicule it as Monty Python did in the film *Life of Brian*, we can seek to explain it away.....or we can humbly fall on our knees before it and allow ourselves to be transformed by its power.

The Pilgrim progressed, wrote John Bunyan in *Pilgrim's Progress*, up the highway which, *was fenced on either side with a wall, and that wall was Salvation. Up this way, therefore, did burdened Christian run, but not without great difficulty, because of the load on his back. He ran thus till he came to a place somewhat ascending; and upon that place stood a Cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a Sepulchre. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the Cross, his burden loosened from his shoulders, and fell from his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the Sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more.*

Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said, with a merry heart, He hath given me rest by His sorrow, and life by His death.