

*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
1 Corinthians 1:18 NRSV*

The last two weeks the Sunday texts have dealt with the calling of Jesus first disciples. Now these next few weeks, we are treated to texts that seem to deal with what is to be proclaimed to others. The gospel texts are from the "Sermon on The Mount", so that is a natural place to go to find out what Jesus expects of his followers. The other texts seem to spell out what it is the most important thing to proclaim.

This week our epistle text comes from Paul's first letter to the church of Corinth (as the epistle readings will for a number of weeks after).

The church in Corinth was the not the easiest situation Paul had to deal with. For there more than perhaps anywhere else in his ministry Paul's message of the cross came up against a culture, and mind set which tried to "dress up" the message to make it more compatible with the local culture.

The first thing they did was to try to look as if there was great and hidden wisdom in their new found faith. Perhaps this is the reason we find "speaking in tongues" here and nowhere else. If you had an "unknown Language", that would indeed not only sound mysterious but make you accessible to "hidden wisdom". How much would having such "wisdom" make them "popular" with the local culture? Consider what one person said about Corinth:

"There were "wise men" on every corner with the solution to the world's problems"

The second cultural move they made was to value who was the most "eloquent" speaker. Corinth was the scene for a yearly contest to judge the "most eloquent speaker". So you hear Paul talk a lot about "factions" in the church. This tendency to judge the eloquence of the speaker probably was a source for the factionalism Paul talks about in many times in this letter.

So when Paul proclaimed the message of the cross, it was in real opposition to every cultural ideal the Corinthians valued. Crucifixion was a form of execution so low and disgusting one never spoke about it in mixed company. So to say the leader of your religion died on a cross could sound absolutely nonsensical to Corinthian hearers. It was also a "turn-off" to potential Jewish converts there, since the Messiah was generally seen as what we would call a "super hero" today.

Yet Paul doesn't abandon his preaching of the cross, so that they can look "acceptable" to the Corinthian's friends and neighbors. In fact he tells them that it is the center of their faith. In fact their being drawn to Christ never came from all their "outward" and culturally acceptable attributes because they lacked those from the very beginning. It is the cross of Christ that they discovered God's power and yes, God's wisdom. The cross is really the "center of their faith".

Paul's words should speak to us today too, as to what we see as the "center" of our faith. We can't put our trust in buildings as the center of our faith. For whatever reason, we live in a day and age where many beautiful church buildings are vacant or decaying. I always find it sad when I see a beautiful old massive church no longer in use. But really that is not the center. Nor is "memorializing" the past useful.

In Newburyport, Ma. There is an old Presbyterian Church which goes back to about 1730. It's real claim to fame was its' status as a "home base" for The Reverend George Whitfield, the "Billy Graham" of the colonial era. He died in 1775 and is buried underneath the church. There is a huge monument in the church marking his time there. Yet it is a church today which is attended by very few, and except for historians the monument means nothing today.

There are other areas I think which makes the church culturally attractive today, and appealing to many people. But with the work of the Holy Spirit it is still the "word of the cross" which still changes lives and brings hope, life and forgiveness.

Perhaps that is why communion is so meaningful to so many. It is God's love through the cross in the sacrament of Christ's body and blood given to us freely which gives us life.

So may we keep the cross of Christ at the center? While it may be "foolish" to world, it is life for us!

Pr. John Van Haneghan