

The wisdom of the cross

I was browsing in the airport bookshop last week when my plane back from the UK was delayed for what seemed like an eternity, and so it was that I found myself surveying the bestsellers display. I was fascinated to discover what books people in airports apparently buy for those long-haul flights and for endless waiting such as I was experiencing: not, as I would have thought, trashy fiction, and not even the tedious memoirs of celebrities I've never heard of, but rather books that might be described broadly as 'self-help' or 'personal development'. So, featured prominently amongst the bestsellers were some by one author the titles of whose books, unfortunately, I can't repeat as they all contain words that I would not utter in church. Here, however, are some of the subtitles which are repeatable: 'how to be what you are and use what you've got to get what you want'; and 'how to stop worrying about what you should do, so you can finish what you need to do and start doing what you want to do'. And so on. And you would be amazed at how many such books are evidently sold in an airport bookshop.

Personally, I don't read such books – perhaps I am beyond self-help – but I recognise that this is a genre which is incredibly popular today and which includes titles that doubtless vary widely in quality and in wisdom. So, for example, moving beyond the airport chart and going global you will find a recent bestseller whose author has caused much stir, a clinical psychologist and professor of psychology in Toronto whose book is entitled, '12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos'. This book delves deeply into psychology, mythology and theology, taking self-help to an altogether more profound level.

Looking at these, I couldn't help wondering if this is religion for a secular age. Having dispensed with God our focus is relentlessly on ourselves and certain questions become urgent: how do I live well, (whatever 'well' means)? How do I realise my potential? How do I avoid the pitfalls of life? Often such self-help is largely an to counter the threats to our humanity posed by the dysfunctional world that we have created for ourselves, an effort to unravel the knots we have tied ourselves with. And as such it can, of course, be valuable. Sometimes we need whatever help we can get, and are grateful for wisdom from wherever it may come.

Yet if this is religion for the modern, secular age, it's instructive to compare it with our reading from Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians this morning. Paul is writing here to a church which has become dysfunctional and the first thing that strikes us is that he talks an awful lot about God. He doesn't dive in to address the problems facing this church community – he will get to all that, but for Paul human problems are always framed and thrown into relief by God. The danger with much self-help is that not only does it usually avoid all God talk like the plague, but it can become unhealthily focussed on me, on my needs, my desires, my rights as I perceive them. Yet the paradox at the heart Paul's faith is that in turning to God other things are taken care of, in seeking first God's Kingdom all things will be added to us, in dying with Christ we rise to new life. Or in the terms of this passage – in foregoing the wisdom of the world we discover the treasures of God's foolishness.

Paul, however, does not simply speak about God. His is the message of the cross, where God in Christ reconciled the world to himself. And this is important in the wider context of this letter to this church. You see, something had happened in Corinth which amounted to a social revolution. In a city polarised between rich and poor, slave-owners and slaves had sat down together in the church and discovered their common humanity as they broke bread together. Old pecking orders were dismantled. And this was all because their life was centred on a crucified Messiah. Crucifixion, you see, was the most degrading form of execution possible, reserved for slaves and rebels, for the lowest of the low. And when you build your community around a crucified criminal – around a cross – then everyone is in. No-one is too low. You start at the bottom and work up. At Corinth, however, the old order was reasserting itself. The old top-down patterns were reappearing and the slaves were being relegated and so Paul writes to remind them: we proclaim Christ crucified! The cross inverts and subverts. The first are last and vice-versa. This is Christ's upside—down kingdom where slave and free sit down together at the table of fellowship.

I suspect that much self-help literature is directed at the relatively powerful. I suspect that many of the issues it addresses are what you might call 'first-world problems', problems that emerge out of our relative affluence. The fact that these books sell so well in airport bookshops speaks volumes about who buys them. I can't see them being bedside reading in the Mulanje Mission Hospital in Malawi that this church supports.

Self-help has its place, even if at times it may be something of a first-world pre-occupation. The Gospel, however, speaks of divine help. It brings the love of God into the picture and that is essential to our humanity. God's foolishness, centred on the cross, reaches down to the very bottom, begins there, and from there offers hope of uniting the human race – as had been glimpsed in Corinth. And this we proclaim and this we celebrate here this morning as we gather around this table. Amen.

O gracious and loving God,
 eternal and sovereign one,
 invisible and intangible God
 who has come amongst us in the skin and bone
 and the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth,
 we praise and worship you.

O God,

How are we to make sense of a universe Maker who has become a
 Creature?

How are we to grasp an immortal God
 revealed in a crucified criminal writing on a cross?
 How, O God, are we to believe such foolishness?
 All we can do is take off our shoes and worship,
 for we find ourselves on holy ground.

O God

forgive us that we prefer the comfortable wisdom of the world to your
 strange ways.

You have shown us what is right.

Forgive us that we follow other ways
 that appear right through the eyes of the world
 but which are folly in your sight.

We acknowledge and confess to you our sins
 and the sins of the world ...

O God,

Who in Jesus Christ proclaimed forgiveness
 with his dying breath,
 reassure us of you grace and mercy,
 and give us strength to align our lives with you realm
 come upon us in Jesus of Nazareth.

In his name we pray. Amen.