

Cross-eyed

You may know that the New Testament from which we have read this morning was originally written in Greek, and so we of course read a translation. A huge amount, however, can hinge on translation: important nuances can sometimes be lost in translation. And this struck me when I was reading our passage this morning from Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians. I came to verse 28 which reads, 'God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.' Now, I don't know what you might make of that, and what 'reducing to nothing things that are' might mean to you, but I wonder if it might help if I give you another translation of that verse which appears in another version of the Bible: there it reads, 'God has chosen things low and contemptible, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order .' Wow! That maybe sounds a bit revolutionary, doesn't it. Sounds a bit subversive: is that what Christianity is all about? Is that what the Gospel proclaims? The overthrow of the existing order? Is this the Bible or some Marxist manifesto?

Well, this is the third week we have delved into this letter of Paul to the Church at Corinth and I have outlined before what prompted it. Something remarkable had happened in the Church in Corinth. In a typical city of its day, characterised by wealth and poverty, by privilege and disadvantage, Christians in the church there had discovered a new way of living where old hierarchies and pecking orders were overcome and a new level of sharing had emerged. And clearly people who were at the bottom of the pile – the less wealthy, the less educated, the less powerful - were well represented in the church: 'not many of you were wise, not many of you were powerful, not many of you were of noble birth...' says Paul. What was taking place here in the church was nothing less than a new society. For Paul the church in Corinth was not just some harmless distraction – it was a subversive threat. For him the church was not just a little holy huddle, a club of benign do-gooders – it was about the overthrow of the existing order - the undoing, the bringing to nothing, the things that are, the status quo. Such is the power of the Gospel when it is actually lived out.

Well, key to all this was the fact that the Gospel, the Church are founded on a crucified Lord. Paul is entranced by the cross! When God, Lord and Sovereign of all, comes to us in a crucified criminal, a way of execution reserved for the most lowly and despised, then everything changes. You see, if God is just sovereign power then power rules and the powerful are given status and privilege and we all bow to them. But if the sovereign Lord is revealed in a crucified criminal suddenly God's embrace extends to all from the very bottom to the very top and in the words of Mary, Jesus' mother, in her song of praise: 'he has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the holy.' Now the lowly and despised are given dignity and every but as much worth as the powerful and the privileged.

Now the world is changed: everything is inverted and subverted. Think of our reading from Matthew's Gospel from Jesus' Sermon in the Mount, what are usually called the Beatitudes. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit... blessed are the meek... blessed are the merciful... blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right...' and so on. In what kind of topsy-turvy, upside down world does any of that make any sense at all? Well, only in a world presided over by a crucified Lord.

If only we could learn to view the world this way. Think of St Francis of Assisi who might be said to embody many of the beatitudes. Francis called his followers 'les jongleurs de Dieu', literally 'the acrobats of God', and Francis was inspired by a legendary monk who was despondent because he couldn't think of an offering to bring to God as the other monks did. He was however a juggler and an acrobat, and one day in desperation he used these gifts as he could, juggling and tumbling – and ending up standing on his head in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary. And suddenly he realised that for the first time he was seeing the world through God's eyes – upside down.

Again, there's a Christian writer and speaker called Olive Drane who practices clowning, and when she works with groups she sends them out with crosses drawn on their eyes – as clowns often have. It's a graphic illustration of how as Christians we are called to view the world through the cross, to view it through the eyes of the crucified Lord. And if we could only do that, perhaps the beatitudes might begin to take shape in us: we might learn what it means to be poor in spirit in a world of power games; we might learn the strange power of meekness; we might find ourselves hungering and thirsting for righteousness; we might discover peace-making rather than endlessly colluding with violence and conflict and quarrels.

If only we could become cross-eyed! Who knows, we might even find the existing order being overthrown. 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.
 You have shown us how to live rightly and justly
 and to walk humbly with our God.
 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