

The rulers of this age

We continue this morning our series on Paul's 1st letter to the Church in the ancient Greek city of Corinth. And if there is one dominant image in these early chapters of the letter – one which we picked up on last week – it is the cross of Christ. The cross is central to Paul's thought and it is no surprise that he makes repeated references to it. Last week we were thinking about the radical insight that Paul treasures, that the God who is sovereign over all creation, the Creator of the cosmos and the one who holds all things in being is a crucified God – one who has in Christ experienced the humiliation and degradation of the most barbaric method of execution of his day: crucifixion, reserved for the very lowest of the low. When the world is ruled by a crucified God then every notion of power is turned on its head, upside down. Paul, however, then goes on to talk about wisdom, what it means to live wisely and well. And he contrasts the wisdom of the world, a wisdom founded on raw power, with God's wisdom of the cross that appears to be utter foolishness to the world. It's the wisdom that Christ articulated in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel from which we have also been reading, where everything is inverted and turned upside down.

So in our passage this morning Paul continues this theme of topsy-turvy, subversive wisdom. And I want this morning to focusing in on what Paul says about the powers that were at work in crucifying Christ. In verses 6 and 8 of our reading he refers to the 'rulers of this age' who knew nothing of God's true wisdom, who could not recognise it when it was staring them in the face and who therefore crucified the Lord of glory. And here I want to introduce you to a phrase that some biblical scholars use to describe this system of pure power. The phrase is 'the domination system' and let me try to explain what is meant by this: we could think of it this way. The domination system includes all the powers that rule this world – particularly money, sex and power itself. It is a way of ordering society which is hierarchical, that creates inequality, that safeguards the interest of the powerful and that marginalises and disinherits the powerless. The domination system is the way of the world, and it was all too familiar in the city of Corinth and it is every bit as familiar in our world today. It is the way of empire, and it lives by a kind of wisdom that is profoundly deathly and destructive, that festers violence, and that leads to a world teetering on the brink of ecological destruction. What Jesus refers to as mammon is central to the domination system, that combination of wealth and power that turns the world into an uneven playing field where some prosper at the expense of others and the gap between rich and poor widens.

Now, it is important to stress that not everything about the domination system is bad. The Roman empire was part of the domination system in Jesus' and Paul's day and not everything about the Roman Empire was bad. Last week our Men's Group watched the scurrilous film, *Life of Brian* set in the time of Christ. And there is that wonderful scene where a group of hapless revolutionaries are plotting the overthrow of the Roman empire. 'What have the Romans ever done for us?', asks their leader. There is a pause and then someone says, 'well, there are the aqueducts...'. Well, OK, there's the aqueducts, but what else have the Romans ever done for us? 'Well, what about the roads...', pipes up a voice, and so on as all the benefits of the Roman empire – irrigation, law and order, peace - are listed. Not everything about the domination system is bad – in fact the domination system is a perversion of something good. God intends that there should be order and structure in the world. There has to be government and rule and law if human life is to flourish. Power and authority have to be entrusted to some. But when power and authority become detached from the wisdom and authority of God then what results is the domination system, and the world becomes an arena for the survival of the fittest. And the account of Christ's trial and crucifixion reveals the domination system at work. There you see the a combination of factors: the Jewish religious establishment with their devotion to God's law, and the mob baying for Christ's blood, and the figure of Pontius Pilate representing the Roma empire – all conspire together to crucify Christ. There you have it: God's good ordering of the world being twisted and distorted, God's wisdom for the world being eclipsed by human folly, and leading to the crucifying the Lord of glory. Here is the

domination system, Paul's 'rulers of this age', in action. And as we know only too well, it can never be guaranteed to deliver justice.

Now, before returning to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, I want to think for a moment about how the domination system works today, and specifically how it takes hold of the world, how it captures the world, how it gets a grip of the world. One obvious channel is advertising. Mammon, financial power, especially reinforces its hold on the world by advertising and we are constantly bombarded by messages telling us to buy this or to buy that, that such and such will transform our lives. Any of you who were here for our late service on Christmas Eve will have heard me draw attention to a big advertising sign that for several weeks dominated both ends of a street near here. That sign, erected in preparation for Christmas, proclaimed 'Shop. Never Stop.' And what a relief that this past week that sign has finally come down. And on Christmas Eve I pointed out the supreme irony that the street that bears that slogan is Heilegeweg, Holy street, a street associated historically with religious pilgrimages and festivals. And how apt that Holy Street should declare 'Shop, Never Stop' because this is the religion of our day, the religion of the empire of mammon, so integral to the domination system. And 'Shop. Never Stop' reminds us that along with advertising goes the slogan, the soundbite – 'Just Do It' in the case of Nike, or 'Get Brexit Done', or 'Make America Great Again': I wonder what slogans the domination system uses in the country you come from.

And then, of course, there is social media: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and we are learning more and more about the malign influence that these powers have had in interfering in recent elections, so asserting their grip on the world. Elections used to be rigged by plain, old fashioned corruption and some of you will know all about that in the countries you come from – but now with social media the domination system has grown more subtle, such that serious questions are now being asked as to whether or not there can still be free and fair elections anywhere. And don't forget that through the subtle machinations of technology the domination system knows everything about you: your consumer choices, your political persuasions, your lifestyle preferences - Big Brother is indeed watching you. And then there is too the phenomenon of 'influencers', people with vast social media followings who are paid big sums by big companies to promote their products. The definition of an influencers that I found states that they are people 'who have the power to effect the purchasing decisions of others because of his or her authority, knowledge, position or relationship with his or her audience', and of course they are often associated with certain niche products. And the question I ask, the obvious question, is what wisdom do these people possess that they should so influence the lives of others? And what kind of wisdom is it: the wisdom of the domination system, the wisdom of the rulers of this age who crucified the Lord of glory? And, I emphasise, not all these things are bad in themselves: but in captivity to the world's false wisdom God's good ordering of the world is corrupted, distorted.

Well, all that might seem to take us a long way from Corinth, but it most certainly doesn't, for the domination system has an enormous capacity to morph form one generation to another and to reinvent itself while always enduring, and this is its contemporary form. Returning, then, to Corinthians, and to our reading from Matthew's Gospel, we are reminded that alongside the rulers of this age, the domination system, there is also the Kingdom, the rule of God, the realm of God established in Jesus of Nazareth. And Paul, in this passage to the Corinthians, contrasts the way the kingdom takes hold, and how it spreads and how it shapes the lives of people in a city like Corinth. Paul is saying that the ways of the Kingdom are not the ways of the domination system. 'When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come to you proclaiming the mystery of God in lofty words or wisdom... I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.' In today's terms we might say. 'I did not come to you with slick advertising techniques, or snappy sound bites or social media and I am no influencer: I came simply entrusted with the Gospel in all my weakness and inadequacy and my limited means – 'so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom but on the power of God.'

And so we move from Corinth to Amsterdam, a city like all cities under the rule of the powers of this age, the domination system – with all it's good as well as it's bad side, thankful as

we are for all that enables life to flourish besides all that is foolish and destructive and malign. But set in the midst of the domination system, as in Corinth, God has called out people of the Kingdom, people founded on a different wisdom, a different power, a different authority: people of the cross. And it seems sometimes like the domination system is too great, too all-powerful, too all embracing, and Paul might have felt the same in Corinth. But no. All that God wants is ordinary people - you and me - not especially powerful or gifted or special in the eyes of the world, but a people committed to Christ, and a people of prayer; and a people of worship; and a people who draw strength from one another in the bond of what Paul calls *koinonia* or fellowship. They will be a people schooled in the ways of the Kingdom. And Jesus assures us that such a people will be nothing less than the salt of the earth, the light of the world. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
 you summon the earth to a new day,
 and to a new week,
 banishing the darkness and awakening us
 to new opportunities, new possibilities, new gifts.
 We praise and thank you for the blessings you bestow,
 for all that enriches life, for all that brings joy.
 And we praise to that here you meet with us,
 calling us back to our source and our goal,
 the one in whom we live and by whom we are held.
 And we need these times of worship, and fellowship,
 for otherwise we become detached from you,
 and we drift from your ways and your truth,
 and we are moulded and shaped by the world around
 rather than by your kingdom, your rule, your wisdom.
 O God forgive us for when we fall prey to the powers
 at work in the world,
 powers that sap abundant living and kill joy,
 powers that offer life but that deal death.
 O God, forgive us we pray for our captivity
 to all that resists you and your Spirit,
 and raise us up we pray to obedience,
 new freedom in the realm of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,
 in whose words we pray together, saying...