

“The Message of 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 [17-25]

It was an early afternoon in August 1977 and I am reclining in the chair of the Mosgiel Intermediate School’s Dental clinic looking out the window on a nice day with the nurse preparing to inspect my teeth, when over the radio playing in the background came the news... The King is dead, the late, the great, the king of rock and roll, Elvis Presley has died. The king is dead. End of story, at least you would think so. Later in life during my travels I was speaking with a young lady in a youth hostel at Niagara Falls who was from a Midwestern state in the USA, who had never heard of NZ before, who in the middle of our conversation out of no where declared, “Elvis is alive, and he’s working in a supermarket.” ‘Ah, Yeah right’ I thought to myself and out of sheer politeness I did not respond and comment on the validity of her statement as she was overcoming other more significant issues in her life at the time. And then, there was the big news in January of this year, somewhat missed because it was overshadowed by Donald Trump’s inauguration as President of the USA.

This overlooked international headline read,

Did Elvis attend his own birthday party?

A large man with white hair and a white beard visited Graceland Sunday January 15th on the eighty-second birthday of Elvis Presley. Someone posted his photo on the Facebook page "Elvis is Alive." Now conspiracy theorists claim that the man is Elvis himself. They believe that Elvis faked his death in 1977 and has been living in seclusion ever since. They claim there were discrepancies with his death certificate, reports of a wax dummy in the original coffin, and several accounts of Presley planning a diversion so he could retire away from public life.

From this new item I also learned that some followers have even formed, get this, the First Presleyterian Church of Elvis the Divine. The tenets of their faith require Presleyterians to face (Viva) Las Vegas daily and make a pilgrimage to Graceland, Elvis’ former home in Memphis, Tennessee at least once in their lives... sounds like they’ve borrowed some tenets of the Old Testament and Islam to form their religion.

So, if you were talking to Presleyterians today, how would you receive their message? What do you make of it? The average person would naturally think 'What a load of rubbish!' What kind of a fool are you to believe such a story, let alone practice it as a religion, perish the thought. It is sheer absurdity to believe this. Elvis is dead and long gone. He did not come back from the grave or out of seclusion to attend his own 82nd birthday. It would however be hard to convince a Presleyterian otherwise that they are wrong, even if you cited all the relevant evidence in existence today.

In Paul's first letter to the small fledgling, fractured and spiritually immature church of the city of Corinth, which was the chief commercial and political centre of Greece, he was addressing baby Christians who were surrounded by a large immoral and unbelieving mainly Greek population, with a few Jews in the mix. To this Church in this culture, Paul did not come preaching human wisdom. For he realised that the straightforward presentation of the message of the cross produces two effects: It is foolishness to those who are on their way to being lost, who are perishing; but it is the Power of God to those who are being saved (v18).

The very same issues that we face today as believers correspond to those that the church faced two thousand years ago in Corinth where skeptics and unbelievers view our faith as silly and absurd as Presleyterianism, considering us fools to believe in Jesus Christ and follow him faithfully as a member of his body, the church. To both the Greek and the Jew, the message of Christianity sounded to these two groups like the most absurd folly that their ears had ever heard according to their own human wisdom and philosophy.

Which is why Paul began with a quote from Isaiah 29:14 to show how human wisdom left to its own devices will fail. Which is true because, when we consider the fact that for all its own wisdom the world had never found God and was still left floundering in its own wise effort attempting to discover the truth and grasp hold of God. This very search by humanity to connect with something much bigger than itself, was meant by God to reveal to human beings their own inability and helplessness. God's intention was to create in the human heart the condition necessary so that any person would be able to accept the word of the One who is the only true way to God.

What was the word contained in the Christian Message?

If we study four sermons from the book of Acts, (2:14-39; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 10:36-43) we learn that the distinct elements of the Christian message are:

1. That the great promised time of the Kingdom of God has come;
2. That Jesus Christ lived, died on the cross in humanity's place, and was resurrected to life by the power of God;
3. That the above was in the fulfillment of prophecy (from the OT);
4. That Jesus Christ will come again a second time; and lastly,
5. There is an urgent invitation to humanity to repent and turn to Jesus for the forgiveness of sin in order to receive the promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jews could not cope with this message finding it absurd and therefore a stumbling block to belief for two reasons.

Firstly, they found it incredible that the One who died on the cross could possibly be the Messiah because their Law stated, "Cursed is he who is hung on a tree." (Deuteronomy 21:23).

Crucifixion actually proved to them that Jesus could not be God's son. Even with the evidence of the suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, the Jews had never entertained the thought, let alone believed that their Messiah would suffer in this way. So, the message of the Cross was now an insurmountable barrier to their belief in Jesus.

Secondly, the Jews were looking for the miraculous demanding powerful earth shattering signs and displays of power from their Messiah such as parting the Jordan River or commanding the walls of Jerusalem to fall down or that the Roman Empire's Leaders, Army and authority over them be completely destroyed. Jesus on the other hand was just some meek and quiet living little servant from Galilee who avoided publicity and was in no way spectacular as one who ended up dying on a cross. Therefore, it was foolishness and impossible to believe that he was God's chosen One.

To the Greeks also the message was foolishness for two reasons. The first is that according to their philosophy they argued that the first characteristic of God is *apatheia*, which means the total inability to feel. For if God can feel joy or sorrow, anger or grief as humans do then it means that any person at any given moment could influence God, affecting and moving God in such a way which would prove that a human being is therefore greater than God is. So, according to the Greeks in order for God to be God,

He must be incapable of feeling in order that no human may ever affect him. So, a God who suffered was a contradiction in terms and therefore could not come in the flesh and dwell amongst humanity involving him self in our trifling mortal affairs.

Secondly, the Greek sought wisdom, but not in the positive sense that we understand wisdom to be. Instead, wisdom in the Greek culture meant having a clever and sharp mind combined with a cunning tongue and the ability to speak for hours discussing trifling issues while all the time having no intention or interest in offering any solutions to the problem or issue in question. It was all about ingratiating and glorifying your self in front of an audience with the words of your silver tongue and cunning brain, concentrating more on the delivery than the substance. Greek audiences were therefore used to such entertainment and appreciative of this kind of delivery. So when the gospel was preached to them the preacher came across as a rather uncultured and crude person with the blunt message they delivered, both of which were ridiculed and laughed at, rather than listened to respectfully, thought about and reflected upon.

In Corinth then where Paul wrote this note to the church it looked as though the Christian message had little chance of success against the prevailing culture, but, as Paul said, "What looks like God's foolishness is wiser than humanity's wisdom; and what looks like God's weakness is stronger than humanity's strength."

Application:

"The Message of the Cross is Foolishness to those who are Perishing, but to us who are being Saved it is the Power of God" It is time to stop following the wisdom of this world. For God's word says that "The fool says in their heart, there is no God." (Psalm 14:1) It is time to lay aside such human thinking which makes you such a fool in God's eyes by not believing that our Heavenly Father sent his son Jesus, to shed his blood, dying on the cross in your place, paying the price for you sin, including the sin of foolishness which Jesus lists as one of many in Mark 7:22. If you are such a person I pray that the message of the cross would cease to be foolish in it's meaning to you because such wisdom would have you perish forever. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16"

And for those being saved this message is the power of God. Paul wrote in Romans 1:16 "The message of the gospel has divine power to save everyone who believes". Such power continues as we open ourselves to be filled with it as the dynamic forceful miracle working power that may not have broken down physical walls but it has broken down spiritual barriers. It was this very power that God used to overcome death its self when he resurrected Jesus from the dead.

It's the same strong abundant inherent power, that the Lord continues to pour out upon his children in Christ's church to perform miracles even today, to pray for the healing of the sick and deliverance from demonic bondage, and to receive specific Words to speak into others lives to build them up and encourage them, and even to demolish the strongholds of the foolish thinking of their minds with the Wisdom of the spirit of truth which convicts humanity with regards to right and wrong, sin and error. A believer has the Holy Spirit living in them to use to be witness to others of the message of the cross, the power of God for us who are being saved.

I will conclude by saying this: Claiming Elvis is alive turns out to be like claiming Aliens from outer space are living in your back yard—if no evidence can dissuade you, you cannot persuade us. This is how many people view Christianity—a superstitious faith founded on wishful thinking whose followers refuse to change their beliefs regardless of the evidence. But they're wrong. According to Paul, if Jesus was not raised from the dead, "our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:14). The resurrection is the "rope from which we swing," the historical fact that demonstrates the authenticity of our faith. Here's the catch: people in the twenty-first century cannot witness a resurrection that occurred in the first century. Therefore, we must be the evidence they seek. We must be so yielded to God's Spirit that God's Son can live his resurrected life in us. This and nothing less is Jesus' intention for your life and mine, today as those who are being saved- it is the very power of God living in and working through us.

So let us pray and confess our sins, our need for a Saviour, the Lordship of Christ over our lives and after humbling ourselves in this way, to receive the power of God the Holy Spirit to fill us afresh and renew us this morning.