

The Third Sunday of Lent

(Year B)

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| <i>First Reading</i> | Exodus 20:1-17 |
| <i>Response</i> | You have the words of eternal life; |
| <i>Psalm</i> | Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11 |
| <i>Second Reading</i> | 1 Corinthians 1:22-25 |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. |
| <i>Gospel</i> | John 2:13-25 |

The third Sunday for the season of Lent for year B, the second reading, continues our journey through the season of Lent and continues to give us an emphasis — a focus — the Church gives us a focus on the Cross and the mystery of the Cross. And this week the Church picks one of the most famous passages in all of Paul's letters about the mystery of the Cross. It's the passage in which Paul talks about preaching Christ and Him crucified. So let's read 1 Corinthians 1:22-25.

And before I read the passage, the context here is that Paul is writing to the Church at Corinth, which is an ancient Greek city — very metropolitan area, very cosmopolitan in the sense that there are a lot of different religions, a lot of different peoples there. It was a port city. There were people from very high strata of society and people from rather low-end strata.

It was a diverse group that he's writing to, and some people in the group have been criticizing Paul because he's not as eloquent as some other preachers of the Gospel who have come into the city of Corinth — probably Apollos here, who was a famous early Christian speaker who was from Alexandria, which was the intellectual capital of the Greek-speaking Jewish world. And he would have been trained in rhetoric and philosophy and all these things that Paul may or may not have had the same skills in...in terms of his oral presentation.

Paul tells us himself that orally and in person he was not strong as he was with the pen. He was a better writer than he was a speaker. And so Paul here is, in a sense, defending certain accusations against him and against the Gospel itself, that it wasn't up to the standards of Greek wisdom and philosophy and rhetoric. And he responds to this with a brilliant *apologia* — a defense of the Gospel, in which he homes in on the mystery of the Cross as really the center of its power, the power of preaching. And this is what he says, 1 Corinthians 1:22-25:

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.¹

So Paul can be eloquent if he tries here, as you can hear there in those verses. So just a couple of brief points about this verse. First thing...when he says that:

...Jews demand signs...

The Greek word that he's using there is used elsewhere to refer to miracles or wonders. So for example, in the Gospel of John, Jesus will frequently perform signs, like the sign at the wedding at Cana or the sign of the healing of the official's son. So there are these various signs throughout the Gospel. *Sémeion* is the Greek word that John uses there. And it's a visible action, a visible wonder that points beyond itself to some invisible mystery.

So what Paul's referring to here is the fact that when he would preach the Gospel to Jewish audiences — so for example, in the book of Acts, Paul always goes to the synagogues first. And that's where he will proclaim Christ. He says that many of them demanded signs. In other words, they asked for wonders to be performed — signs to be performed — to verify the claims that are being made about Jesus Christ.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

And it's actually interesting here, if you go to Paul's letter to the Romans, as opposed to 1 Corinthians, in his letters to the Romans, he actually says in Romans 15:19 that:

...by the power of signs and wonders...I have fully preached the gospel of Christ...

So elsewhere in his writing, he actually points out that when he went around and preached the Gospel, he also performed miracles in order to validate or verify the truth of his message. And we see this in the book of Acts, over and over again — both Peter and Paul perform signs and wonders, perform miracles, as they're preaching the Gospel to the Jews in order to show that Jesus is in fact the Messiah. In other words: "You don't just have to take my word for it. I'm going to perform a miracle to show you that I have divinely authorized power, and that I'm preaching something that is true, that has been authorized by God, verified by God." So he says, on the one hand — back to 1 Corinthians 1 — Jews demand signs.

And what about the Greeks? The Greeks seek wisdom. Now the Greek word there for wisdom is *sophia*. And we get the word philosophy from that. *Philosophia* in Greek literally means...people usually translate it as "love as wisdom," and that's right. But a *philos* isn't just any kind of love. It's the love of a friend...*philosophia*. So a person who is a lover of wisdom or a person who is a friend of wisdom is a philosopher. That's what a philosopher is — friend of wisdom.

So the Greeks seek for wisdom. In other words, they want philosophy. So they want to use reason to verify the Gospel. It needs to be subject to the analysis of philosophical reasoning. So there are different ways to verify it. You can verify it empirically through signs and wonders, or you can verify it rationally through reason and philosophy. And Paul says:

...but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles...

Okay, so he preaches the Cross here. Now, in order to understand those two responses he's going to give to Jews and Gentiles from the Cross, we have to put the Cross and the Crucifixion of Jesus in its first century Jewish setting...but also its first century Greco-Roman setting. How would crucifixion have been understood in a first century Greco-Roman and Jewish setting?

In order to see this, there are two quotes that I can give you that will help. The first one is from the book of Deuteronomy. In the book of Deuteronomy chapter 21:22-23, there's a passage from the law of Moses that actually says that anyone who dies being hung on a tree is accursed of God. So listen to these words. This is from Deuteronomy 21:

And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God; you shall not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance.

Now, if you look at that passage, strictly speaking what it's saying is: anyone who is executed by hanging is considered to be accursed. Now, most of us don't link "hanging" with crucifixion in our minds. We think of it as two different ways of being executed. But in the ancient world, they were tied together because various forms of suspension on wood and death through crucifixion — or sometimes just called suspension. Hanging a person on some erected form of wood was — whatever shape the wood might be in — was associated with or identified as what we would call crucifixion. In other words, there are a variety of ways to execute someone by hanging, and one of them was crucifixion...what we would think of as crucifixion.

So by the first century AD, when the method of execution by crucifixion as Christ was crucified was very widespread under Roman rule, because that's the method they used to execute slaves. This passage was linked with the method of execution that we call crucifixion. And you can see this in early Jewish writings from the time of Jesus...or you can see it in Paul himself. For example, if you look at Galatians 3:13, Paul says this:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us —for it is written, “Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree”...

So you see there, in Galatians 3 Paul himself explicitly interprets the curse of hanging in Deuteronomy 21 as applying in the case of Jesus’ Crucifixion, because He’s suspended from the wood of a tree when He’s suspended on the wood of the Cross.

So, if you take that back to 1 Corinthians 1, the reason Paul says that the cross is a stumbling block to Jews is because the Greek word there for “stumbling block” is *skandalon*. It’s something that makes you trip up. If a *skandalon* is in the road, you might trip over it and fall down...so the reason the Crucifixion of Jesus is a scandal or stumbling block to the Jews is because according to Jewish law (as read in the first century), a person who is crucified is accursed of God.

So you have Christians like Paul going around saying, “Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the king of Israel. Jesus is the Son of God.” Meanwhile, a Jewish person hearing that for the first time will look at the Torah and say, “Well, hold on. How did he die? He died by being hung on a tree? He died by crucifixion? Well, according to the Torah, a person who is hung on a tree, a person who is crucified, is not blessed by God but cursed by God.”

So some Jews, according to Paul, saw the Crucifixion as a countersign to Jesus’ Messianic identity. They saw the Crucifixion as reason for *disbelieving* the Gospel rather than believing the Gospel...so it was a stumbling block.

On the other side of the coin, if you look at crucifixion in a Greco-Roman setting, from a Roman perspective, crucifixion was considered the most shameful form of death, because it was a death that was both horrific — in terms of its physical suffering that it entailed and the torture that it entailed — but also because of the public shame of it being reserved only for slaves. Paul will learn this truth very harshly himself, when at the end of his life he’s executed by decapitation because there were two forms of execution. Decapitation was how you would execute a Roman citizen. Crucifixion was how you would execute a slave. That’s

why Peter is crucified, according to Jerome and other early Church historians, when he's executed in Rome, because he's not a citizen like Paul. He doesn't have Roman citizenship; he's a Jewish slave of the empire.

So, Cicero — first century Roman orator, one of the most famous Roman writers — said this about the shame of crucifixion. Cicero not only called the Cross “the tree of shame” — that's how he described it — but he also had this to say about crucifixion:

[T]he executioner, the veiling of the head and the very word “cross” should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes, and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things... [but] indeed the very mention of them, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.²

That's from Cicero's *Oration against Verres*, number 16. So Cicero is basically saying crucifixion is so shameful we shouldn't even talk about it. A Roman citizen shouldn't even mention it. That is totally reserved for slaves and nobodies in the empire.

So when Paul comes around and he has Greeks (like in the Church at Corinth), and he's saying to them, “Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, is the Son of God and the king of the world, the savior of the world” — from a Roman perspective, this man who was crucified is a nobody. He's a slave. And so the Greek response to Paul's proclamation of Christ crucified is that it's foolishness to say that the Savior of the world and the king of the universe was crucified. Because according to a Roman, if someone is crucified, by definition that means they are a slave and not a king. It means they are a slave and not a citizen, much less the king of kings and lord of lords. See how that works?

So when Paul said that to the Greeks, that the Cross was foolishness, the Greek word there is actually *mōria*, which means it's moronic. We get the word “moron” from that Greek word. It's idiocy to say that a crucified man is the savior and king

² Cicero, *Oration against Verres* 16; trans. M. Hengel; elsewhere Cicero calls the cross “the tree of shame”

of the world...but that's what Paul is going around preaching. So the Jews demand signs, the Greeks demand wisdom. I preach Christ crucified...we, I should say, the Apostles:

...but we preach Christ crucified, a [*skandalon*] to Jews and [moronic idiocy] to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:23-25)

So good...and Paul. So powerful. This is really pressing into the mystery of the Cross. It *is* a scandal. It does seem stupid. It does seem idiocy. It does seem moronic...if you look at the cross through the eyes of the world, if you look at it from an earthly perspective. But if you look beyond the visible to the *invisible* mystery of who it is hanging on the cross, and why He's hanging there, and what He's accomplishing through His Passion and through the outpouring of His blood, it becomes the very vehicle through which God will redeem not just the Jews — and God will save not just the people of Israel — but the nations as well, the Gentiles as well. Because the problem of sin is a universal problem. It's not just a Jewish problem; it's just a Greek problem. It's a universal human problem, so it's going to take a universal savior to atone for it. And that's what He accomplishes.

And that's why Paul goes around preaching Christ and Him crucified. It's the heart of the Good News, because it's the sign of God's love for humanity. He pours out His love on the Cross.

But you don't have to take my word for it. You can take John Chrysostom — Golden Mouth, the great preacher of Constantinople. In his homily on 1 Corinthians, his fourth homily, this is what he says — very interesting — he says about these verses...about how the Cross, although it should repel people because it seems to be a scandal and foolishness, actually attracts them. Listen:

Vast is the import of the things here spoken! For he means to say how by contraries God has overcome, and how the Gospel is not of man... The gospel produces the exact opposite of what people want and expect, but it is

that very fact which persuades them to accept it in the end. The apostles won their case, not simply without a sign, but by something which appeared to go against all the known signs. The cross seems to be a cause of offense, but far from simply offending, it attracts and calls believers to itself.³

John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, homily 4, paragraph 5. The first thing I would say here is this. In terms of preaching, notice here Paul — in contrast to many modern day preachers — does not presume the Cross. He doesn't presuppose the Cross; he *proposes* the Cross. He preaches the Cross. He doesn't assume everyone understands it. He preaches Christ and Him crucified.

And I just ask the question, especially if you preach yourself...do you do that? How often? When is the last time you preached Christ and Him crucified? I don't know about you, but in my experience as a cradle Catholic, as someone growing up in the Catholic Church, who met my — now she's my wife, but at the time my girlfriend who was coming out of the Protestant tradition. I used to go to Mass, and then I'd also attend her service; I'd compare. And I noticed that Sunday after Sunday in the Protestant church, you'd hear the preaching of the Cross, the preaching of Christ crucified, the preaching of Christ dying for the salvation of the sins of the world. And it was very effective evangelistic maneuver, to preach — and I don't mean it as tactical, I mean just the reality. To preach Christ dying for your sins is a powerful message and will often be very effective in bringing people to conversion.

By contrast, my experience growing up as a Catholic and the homilies that I often heard just didn't get around to focusing on that — maybe during Holy Week but not as a regular occurrence in terms of preaching of the Gospel. It's something to pause and consider and reflect upon: to what extent does my preaching reflect the centrality of the Cross, of Christ crucified? Am I preaching Christ and Him crucified?

It also makes me think about this...one reason I bring it up is because Archbishop Fulton Sheen — I once heard him say something, and it really caught my attention.

³ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 4.5; trans. Gerald Bray; cf. *NPNF1*, 12:18

He said that when (and I may have mentioned this elsewhere)...he said that when he used to be invited — at the height of his fame and his renown, when he was on television/radio in the 50s and 60s and even earlier — he used to be invited to many prestigious universities. And the more secular and more prestigious the university setting, the more he insisted that he would go in and not try to use philosophy and great rhetorical power to convince, but he would simply preach the Cross and Christ crucified.

And he always said that in his experience, it resonated even with the most secular audiences to preach the Cross. And the reason is very simple. It's because the message of the Cross is the message of Divine Love. It's the message of charity. It's the message of God's saving love for each individual human soul. And there's a power there that's unleashed just to preach the message and the Good News of Jesus Christ and Him crucified that kind of cuts through both the demand that we have — the temptation to say “I want empirical verification” on the one hand — and the demand to say “I want rational verification” on the other...so the demand for signs and wisdom.

And both of those things are important. We'll see Jesus is both the greatest philosopher, the wisest man ever, and he also performs the greatest miracles ever. So those matter, but the Cross (in a sense), it doesn't negate them, but it transcends them. And the preaching of the Cross does the same thing.

You want to increase the numbers in your Church? You want to increase the number of souls you reach in your parish? Start preaching Christ and Him crucified. Start preaching Christ's Cross and the love of the Cross, and you'll see it draws people in. Even the most secular — even the most hard-hearted (so to speak), the people who might be resistant, who might think Christianity is foolishness, moronic idiocy — can be wooed, according to St. Paul and according to St. John Chrysostom, by the message of the Cross.

And it's so powerful and so important that on this third Sunday of Lent, that the Church reminds us of that. Because obviously, there are seasons throughout the Church, and times and seasons to preach the life of Christ, the birth of Christ. But during Lent and Lent in particular, our eyes need to be focused — and our

preaching should be focused — on Christ and Him crucified. Now I think that's really what Paul means when, in 1 Corinthians 2 later on, just a few verses down he says:

When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:1-2)

In other words, when Paul — especially when he first presents the Gospel to the Corinthians — his first move isn't to use lofty words of wisdom that might attract them and impress them, but to go straight to the heart of the matter and to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.