

Sermon preached by Bishop Anne Dyer at St Andrew's Cathedral, Aberdeen

Lent 3B

4 March 2018

Proclaiming Christ crucified

Imagine that you are new in town, and you have to preach your first sermon in a new place. You ponder... what to do, how to be?

There are universities in the city, so one could expect that some present will be clever, and may want to be impressed by learning. You might wonder about being erudite....

You can see that there are others present, who might want to be impressed by how relevant you are – how hip and cool. They will be used to CGI, and street magicians, and all that is flash and current....

You wonder if you could manage something spectacular....

St Paul knew about these feelings.

He was often a new preacher in town, a speaker of some renown. Crowds gathered, hoping to hear something a little bit impressive, although they were a crowd of different people looking for different things.

St Paul was used to this. He understood his audience... both when he spoke, and later when he wrote to them, for example in today's epistle to the church at Corinth.

The city port of Corinth hosted a very mixed community, you could say that a good cross section of the empire was gathered there, or at least passing through. If you wanted a taster of what the Roman world looked like... here it was.

It was a city of diversity, different cultures and nationalities rubbing shoulders with one another. And when it came to God, they had a clear sense of what they wanted and were looking for.

The majority culture was Greek, of the 'academy' you might say. They were well formed by learning. And even in a society which was stratified, (they were after all slave and free) they thought of themselves as cultured and wise. And as ever with humanity, they created Gods made in the image of what they valued most.

In Corinth, where Aphrodite the goddess of love had once ruled supreme (supported

by a booming sex-trade), new cults had emerged - imported from across the sea the worship of Isis, the Egyptian Goddess of wisdom, and from the East, the mysteries of Mithras.

Wisdom and mystery, this is what Paul knew they liked.... a spiritual quest, the finding of a God who is impressive in the intellectual challenge, known through deep exploration of clever and mysterious things.

And along-side these Greeks, Jews from the diaspora, scattered across the Roman empire but very present in Corinth. Communities that first settled following persecution, were now thriving. They gathered for worship, kept to their common laws and practices, and they looked to God to save and help them. But most of all, to be convinced, if they were ever to reshape their lives, they wanted a sign, a miracle, something spectacular – something that would convince them that God indeed was with them. They had precedents – let bread or fire fall from heaven, let the sea part...

All this Paul the preacher knew... as the crowd gathered before him, this is what they wanted – either erudite wisdom or a miraculous sign. This was his choice. So should he be clever then? Should he use wise words and wonderful rhetoric? Or should he be spectacular, should he call on heaven for a whirl-wind, for chariots of fire?

With integrity he could do neither. He knew exactly what they thought they wanted, he understood them, but he resisted.

He later wrote, as we heard today: 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.'

His choice? Well to preach Christ crucified, his only option – but not one that sat well with expectations.

For it really does not look like any kind of wisdom that the Son of God can be found hanging on a cross, crucified. Where is the wisdom in this, a God who dies, who suffers with and for the lowest?

And what kind of sign is this, where is the power and the victory? How can this appalling abandonment speak in any way of God?

For, if this is how Jesus dies, what does this say about a community then shaped in

his image.... Shaped around the life of the one once crucified?

Jew and Greek resisted, they tried to tweak the message, as we might, to make it more palatable. It is not a coincidence that early Christian heresies included tellings of the Gospel Story that required special knowledge and insight to which only a few had access, and a version of the coming of Christ where he did not have a real human body, and so did not suffer at all in the same way that we do.

But, Paul writes, he preaches Christ crucified because: 'God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.'

Paul knew that some would just not get it, but he also knew that many, many would: 'For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.'

So where does this leave me, preaching this, my first sermon as your bishop....

There has been much speculation, some private, but much in the public domain, concerned with what my episcopate is going to be about, what my priorities are going to be. So let me take this opportunity to say this...

I am going to be talking about Jesus and his story – everywhere I can, to whoever I can. I am going to try to tell it all – yes his incarnation, and his resurrection, his ascension, his eternal presence with the Father and the Spirit....

But I am going to be speaking about Jesus who loves us, and is kind, and is merciful, who is compassionate towards us, who absolutely gets how life is for us, who desires full and abundant life for every person. I will be speaking about the cost of this – first of all for him, but also for those who follow, the cost of putting others first, of being a servant.

You know that there really is no such thing as Christendom any more. There are generations of folk who have not ever been near church, the majority do not know the story – especially those that are younger. They know nothing much about Jesus – except that maybe he was a good man, once, long ago.

So I will be inviting the diocese to share in this telling of his story with me – through your words, but also through what you do, and how you live.

Together we will tell the story clearly, robustly. We will tell it all, in every place that we can, to everyone.

We will tell a story of Jesus who upsets and disturbs the temples of our lives, who wants a clear out, a repurposing, a new direction.

We will tell this message, that contains no earthly wisdom, and is not spectacular, but costly. A message that will be for some offensive, but for others, those who know themselves to be being saved and want to be part of this great adventure, will be life itself.

I wonder, can you say 'Amen' to that?