

**Sermon, 2 April 2017, Swiss Church in London
(Reading: 1 Cor 1:18-25)**

Today's reading is from one of the letters that Paul wrote to the early Christian community in Corinth. In his letters, Paul touches on various issues, some of them answering concrete questions of conduct or theology. But Paul's letters are much more than just standard letters. They are very carefully composed with one crucial topic at their centre: the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection. Paul was the first to interpret the events around the life and death of Jesus Christ in a coherent and theologically reflected way. He explained up and down the country, on his travels and through his letters the meaning of the cross. Whereas the Gospels are an account of the events as they happened, it was through Paul's letters that the Easter events were given a deeper meaning. It is safe to say that without Paul, Jesus and his followers would probably be forgotten by today. We can therefore say that Paul was the actual founder of the Christian religion.

Paul might have been a sharp and influential theologian, but he was also quite a character. He was a fanatic. As a young man Paul was one of the most ruthless persecutors of early Christians before he converted to become the intellectual leader of Christian faith. As ruthless as he was in persecuting Christians, as ruthless he became in defending the true faith - perhaps at times a bit too ruthless. Paul had high moral standards, many of which are foreign to our ears today. He had strict opinions on sexual morals, divorce, sin and the role of women in church. There are many things I profoundly disagree with Paul. But there are also things I agree upon, and one of these things is that Christian faith is foolish.

We are preparing for Easter, the time when we commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus died on the Cross for challenging public and religious authorities claiming to act in the name of God. Three days later he appeared to his disciples and later ascended to heaven. Whereas the Gospels only tell us very little about the resurrection, Paul's letters give us an in-depth interpretation of the events. The experience that life is stronger than death was life-changing for the early Christians. In long letters to the Christians in Rome, Galatia and Corinth, Paul explains the empowering meaning of the resurrection.

I often get asked why I am a Christian and why I preach the Gospel. Christian faith is foolish, people say. It does not make sense to believe in the resurrection of a deceased person. This is wishful thinking, the material fairy-tales are made of. Christians were confronted with the same criticism in the early days, as we can read in the first letter to the Corinthians. Many religious scholars at the time questioned the faith of the early Christians. Some wanted signs, real proves, others doubted the wisdom of the believers and their lack of knowledge. For the religious leaders, all studied men, it was highly irritating that a bunch of craftspeople and fishermen, who did not study theology or history and who were not part of the Temple elite, claimed

that they had their wisdom from God. This bunch of simple workmen and women simply bypassed the Priests and teachers for whom God's wisdom was more complex than the simple and straight forward belief of Christ crucified and resurrected. The Jesus movement was an affront for the religious elite.

It is easy to become self-defensive about our faith and to find clever arguments and so-called proves for it. Yet Paul does something different and actually very clever. Rather than being self-defensive, he simply admits: Yes, we are foolish. Of course our faith in the Resurrected is foolishness. It is foolish to see God in the weakness of the crucified. It is foolish to see God in the face of lepers and the poor and the everyday man and woman. This is the opposite of what people have experienced as religion so far. They were used to a God, or gods, depicted as being on the side of the wise studied men, the kings and leaders of the world. God was with the wealthy and glorified in pompous temples. There is nothing glorious at all about God dying on the cross. It turned the whole system upside down. The Egyptian Gods, the Roman Gods, all these were the Gods of the kings and queens. Now here was a God who was the God of everybody, and especially the voiceless and hidden, the sick and dying. How foolish!

Thomas Aquinas, an influential theologian and philosopher of the 13th Century, said: "If Christ had lived in the world of wealth and power and with a high position, it might have been thought that the purpose of the teaching and miracle was to curry human favour and power. Therefore, to make it clear that he was performing a work of divine power, Christ chose all that was low and weak in the world: a lowly mother, a life without riches, and uncultured disciples and messengers. Christ himself was to be rejected and condemned to death by the great ones of the world, to make it perfectly clear that the undertaking of his miracles and his teaching was not of human but of divine power."

What fools we are to still believe today, 2000 years later, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who chose all that was low and weak. How foolish to see God in a man suffering on the Cross. How foolish, and how divine to see the light of God in everyone.

Foolishness however does not mean laziness. Foolishness does not mean ignorance. We are called based on our irrational and foolish beliefs to further the Kingdom of God, to further the Kingdom of the Foolish, those who believe in the unbelievable against all the odds, those who believe in the dignity of every human being, those who see God in the brokenness of this world and not exclusively in the glorious things. God is the one who lifts us up when we are low. God is the one who is on the side of the broken and the voiceless. We cannot say: what happens around us is none of our business because we are fools. Quite the opposite! Bein foolish enough to believe in the resurrection makes us strong. Today it is more important than ever to believe in this foolish message of Christ who has died on the cross and

after three days came back to life. Irrational, unprovable and therefore ever more powerful! Or as Paul said: "For what seems to be God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and what seems to be God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Today more than ever we need to be foolish. We need to believe in miracles. We need to believe that trees can grow in the desert and that flowers can crack open the concrete. We need to hold on to our foolish belief that lives can change in miraculous ways and that the poorest and weakest will be the strongest.

Let us be fools!

Amen