

View from the Pews - God's foolishness

In I Cor. 23, 25, Paul makes an astonishing claim: "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles..... For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." To unpack this statement, we need to step inside the world views of the people who first heard Paul's preaching.

Paul lived and worked in a world dominated by Hellenistic culture at the height of its influence. The Greeks valued rational argument, and considered any new proposition according to whether it made sense to them. They recognised that there could be other gods besides those they knew and worshipped, but to them, any deity worth their allegiance must be noble in birth and powerful enough to overcome all evil. They dismissed, as mere foolishness, Paul's assertion that Jesus was really the Son of the most High God disguised as a humble carpenter, who did some impressive miracles but in the end allowed his enemies to execute him as a criminal.

Jewish culture continued alongside but independently of the much more recent Hellenists, under a completely different set of assumptions. They valued the absolute authority of scriptural prophesy, especially the passages envisioning the coming of a Messiah who would throw off all Greek and Roman influences and reinstate the undisputed rule of Yahweh. They dismissed Jesus as, not only a failed Messiah (one of many), but also a threat to Temple authorities who struggled to maintain the independent culture and traditional worship of Judaism under Roman occupation. To them, Paul's shocking claim that Christ crucified could represent 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' was an impassable stumbling block prohibiting any belief. Remember, this was a generation who had witness the horror and humiliation of a real crucifixion, a man strung up naked by a cruel hostile power to die slowly in public.

Paul replied that 'since ...the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.' Paul is claiming that God has defused the collision of cultural objections ('Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom') by turning the claim of foolishness upon himself. That idea in itself required some radical revision of how Jews understood the nature of God, but those who could do that ("are called"), both Jews and Greeks, could then see Christ as the power of God and the wisdom of God. Wow.

Kim King