

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 7 March 2021

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

### ***God's way vs Human way***

We often wonder what God is doing in the world. In this case, it is necessary to presuppose the presence of God to begin with. Also if we know that who God is and how God ought to behave, it may help us see differences in God's way from human ways. So today, through the two readings – 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 and John 2:13-22, we'll think about it by focusing on the cross and Jesus' cleansing of the Temple.

The cross is an excellent example of how God's way is different from human ways especially when it comes to salvation. On the cross, God revealed Godself who was radically free and radically engaged in salvation. In 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Paul begins with God, who reveals Godself and His power through the most unlikely object – the cross. From human perspectives, the cross may be the last place where people expect to discover God's ultimate wisdom and power.

In the first century world, the cross was a tool to display the power of the Empire. As capital punishment by the Roman Empire, it was to punish rebellious slaves, insurrectionists, pirates, or brigands, who had threatened the divinely sanctioned social order of the Empire. Crucifixion was the imperial instrument used to suppress subversion. As a public spectacle, crucifixion was designed to humiliate its victims through degradation, shame and torture. It was also a political statement that declared that all who threatened the imperial social order would be dealt with the same as the current victims. For the Jews, it could also be regarded as a sign of divine curse.<sup>1</sup>

God, however, had radically engaged in the cross to make it to be the way of salvation. Through four rhetorical questions – 'Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?'<sup>2</sup> Paul shows that God has rejected and embarrassed those who would boast about their

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 21:23, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for possession.

<sup>2</sup>

wisdom and power. For those who pride themselves on their wisdom, the cross appears to be total nonsense. We may ask why God would send his Son to die on a cross in the first place while not sending him as the head of a mighty army to set everything straight. Also, God's way doesn't follow what human ways require as it doesn't depend on concrete signs and wisdom.<sup>3</sup> Demanding a sign is a form of idolatry as it insists that God prove Godself through human ways. In gospel stories, Jesus did work miracles, but it didn't bring people who demanded signs to the faith in God.<sup>4</sup>

In John 2:13-22, we are told another example of God's way. In this event, Jesus showed people what true worship was through the cleansing of the Temple. According to the Mosaic Law, all Jews were to come to Jerusalem for three festivals each year.<sup>5</sup> They were at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) and the Feast of Tabernacles. In this passage, cleansing of the Temple took place at Passover, which was to celebrate God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. In remembrance of the Passover, lambs were sacrificed in Jerusalem each Passover.<sup>6</sup> To celebrate and to be part of the festivals, Jews would come to the Temple from all over Israel with their sacrificial animals.

In reality, however, people were not able to bring sacrificial animals from home because of the distance from home and unpredictable things that could happen at any time during the journey. Even if they arrived at the Temple, there was still no guarantee that the animals were good enough for the sacrifice. Some of them could be injured, or they may have fallen ill.

Further, in the Temple, only special coins were used for the temple tax. Hence the presence of the money change business was in view. The whole business was also related to the chief priest who controlled the entire enterprise of money-changing and sale of sacrificial animals and got his percentage of the gross. Indeed, the 'trade' in question was legitimate and necessary for pilgrims and others who did not have suitable coinage to purchase the animals needed in temple worship. At this point, we cannot help but ask what this whole business is for whom.

Also Jesus had no qualifications to validate his actions from human standards. The priests wouldn't acknowledge him as a priest - nor would the scribes or Pharisees would

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:22

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16:1-4; John 2:23-25; 4:48)

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 16:16; Exodus 23:14-17

<sup>6</sup> The Passover begins on the 15th day of the month of Nisan, which typically falls in March or April of the Gregorian calendar. Passover is a spring festival, so the 15th day of Nisan typically begins on the night of a full moon after the northern vernal equinox.

count him as one of their own. In the next chapter, Nicodemus will call Jesus “Rabbi,”<sup>7</sup> but that is a generous form of address. Nevertheless, Jesus took it on himself to do what is needed, and in the process, he turned everything upside down on one of the Temple’s busiest days of the year. Overall, God’s way is beyond human standards or imagination, not to mention the surpassing human knowledge and wisdom.

In our storytime, the story was about the Sun and the North Wind competing with each other to prove their strength to the other. Interestingly, their choice of the field of the contest was a human being – a traveller. The task was to strip the coat from his back, which would prove who was the strongest. In the end, the North Wind failed to fulfil the task despite his strong wind as it made the traveller hold tight his coat. The Sun took the opposite strategy as she made the traveller feel hot and took off his coat.

In some ways, the cross can be compared to the strategy of the North Wind, as it displays human ways of eliminating obstacles by force for their worldly good. The cleansing of the Temple, on the other hand, may be compared to the method of the Sun in terms of stripping off the unnecessary things from the core. We learn that God showed the power and wisdom through which God’s salvific work can continue even on the cross. Through the cleansing of the Temple, we learn that what true worship is by stripping off all the unnecessary practices according to the tradition. So what does it tell us today, then?

The cross as God’s way helps us understand not only God but understand ourselves as those called by God. It provides us with the experience to encounter God anew precisely where God has most clearly displayed God’s own self, own power and own wisdom. It will always remain as a reminder of offensive idiocy and divine delight. Also, cleansing of the Temple is the way of God to show us what the true worship is in the temple of God. We know that we are the temple of the living God and we are taking up our cross to follow Jesus. Together with the fable of Aesop – The Sun and the North Wind, we will continually reflect on God’s way anew in the season of Lent. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> John 3:2