

Sermon

March 3, 2024

Christ crucified...the power of God and the wisdom of God

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The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, Venice, Florida

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight,
O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.” Please be seated.

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

I remember the evening the Catholic priest came over...I was 5, and it was 1958. Mom had made buttered popcorn when the Reverend Frank J. O’Hara, a young Irishman from Chicago, came to the front door unannounced.

Fr. O’Hara (we would never call him Fr. Frank) announced he was building a new parish and school that would be called St. Kevin’s. Mom agreed to work for him as his secretary; and I invited Fr. O’Hara to our Monday night roast beef dinners – I probably thought that increased my chance for more buttered popcorn, and innumerable other religious perks.

Soon we were celebrating Sunday Mass in the basement of a Jewish drug store, freshly fried sugar donuts upstairs after the service. I made my First Communion in the basement of that Jewish drug store (I have the picture), and we dedicated our new church in 1962.

It only took a couple of years to build our church...but I feel safe in saying that we would not have responded well to an itinerate Christian teacher who came to our new church overturning the bingo tables in the new parish hall and proclaiming: “Destroy St. Kevin’s and in three days I will raise it up.”

I suppose not much has changed in 2024. Imagine anyone telling Dave Beall, or John Buntel that we could have completed the repair and revisioning of Good Shepherd after Ian in just three days...

But Jesus was famous for saying things that drove even his followers over the edge. Just recently in a Morning Prayer Gospel Jesus drove away many of his disciples with these words: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life...⁵⁵for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.”

Jesus seems to have been intentionally provocative.

Paul speaks to this in today's Epistle: "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."

Kathie and I were received into the Episcopal Church in 2011, the year I began my diaconal studies and field work. We were officially received by Bishop Greg Brewer in the Episcopal Diocese of Central Florida.

We were in a small chapel with two other couples when the bishop appeared resplendent all his regalia. He thanked us for asking to be received into the Episcopal Church, and then he confided: "Many of my closest friends would laugh at me dressed up like this, performing a sacred ritual."

That's what Paul is getting at in today's Epistle: "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe."

Except it's not really foolishness to you and I. Yes, "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom." And if we're honest with ourselves we too love a good sign, and we even strive for wisdom.

Our true selves, our spiritual selves do have their roots in the wisdom of the Greeks and the Jews. It is because of those roots that we Christians – Jews, Greeks, all of us – proclaim that "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Maybe that's why Jesus intentionally provokes the Jews in today's Gospel: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

Maybe that is just a good metaphor for His death and resurrection...but maybe there is something more there.

The Jews were always asking Jesus for a sign, and this time He gives them one.

Jesus himself is the sign.

Jesus knew 3 things.

Jesus knew the Jews had faith in this "new" Temple that had been under construction for 46 years; but He also knew the Jews were not ready for the sign God had already sent them...almost 33 years before.

Jesus knew the Jews were not ready for the Messiah God had sent them...a “beloved Son” who came to save sinners, rather than those who trusted in their own righteousness, wisdom, and strength.

Jesus knew the Jews would not understand his provocative statement about raising up the Temple in three days: they would take it literally, Jesus was using it metaphorically.

But the Jews weren't the only ones Jesus was leaving in the dust with His teachings. Even Peter, now the leader of the Twelve, can't get his head around Jesus' teaching “that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected...and after three days rise again.”

Remember last week's Gospel? As Father John said: “Peter had a different five year plan” than Jesus. Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke Him.

But Jesus is having none of that. He rebukes Peter publically: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

This time, when Jesus gives the Jews the sign they asked for, “destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body: Christ will die, Christ will rise, and Christ will come again.

As surely as Paul, in today's Epistle, speaks to us about the message Jesus is giving to us this very day, there is no “human five year plan”...there is only the Good News:

“We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks (and us), Christ...the power of God, and the wisdom of God.”

Amen.