

Fools for Christ

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Date: 01 April 2001

Preacher: John Stewart

[0 : 0 0] Thank you very much, Paul, for your lovely warm welcome to Holy Trinity. May I say what a very real pleasure it is to be with you tonight.

I have always enjoyed my visit to this wonderful parish, and so I've been looking forward to being with you tonight. Later in the service, we receive a number of people into the Anglican Church.

Yes, as Paul has said, this is my last visit to you as the Bishop of the Eastern Region. On the 2nd of May, I'll be inducted as Rector of the Parish of Audend.

I've always felt that I would like to do the last five years of my active ministry as a parish priest. And so after 16 and a half years as a bishop, I'm stepping down to hand over to a younger man, as it were, and allow someone else.

So young Peter Watson will be taking over from me as a bishop of the Eastern Region for a time. And then he has told us all he will, of course, appoint a new bishop of the Eastern Region.

[1 : 1 6] I'm standing before you a little overwhelmed tonight. I brought in and placed my pastoral staff near the pulpit as we came in. That pastoral staff was given to me by Bishop Alfred Stanway, and I never, ever screw it up without thinking of Bishop Stanway, who was for me an enormous inspiration.

I've carried his staff for 16 and a half years, and this church was one of the first I came to. I remember after I learned that I was going to be a bishop. So I was quite overwhelmed.

And seeing Ken and Jay Perry in the congregation tonight, I was saying just the other day, when I was invited to become the bishop, become the General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, I was really wondering whether this was the right thing to do.

The feeling it was, but quite nervous and overwhelmed about that thought. And I sought counsel from Ken and Jay Perry as to whether I should go ahead and accept that invitation.

And they had on their mantelpiece a card which read, God will never lead you where his grace cannot keep you. And the whole time I was talking with Ken and Jay, I was focused on that card.

[2 : 3 3] It meant a great deal to me. And I accepted the invitation and became General Secretary of CMS. Then forgot all about the card until David Penman invited me to be a bishop six years later.

I was absolutely overwhelmed at that, wondering whether I should do that or not. I was rummaging through some stuff, and out came this card that Ken and Jay had given me. God will never lead you where his grace cannot keep you.

And now, this week, in going to Wooden, Janine and I were starting the business of packing. And Lomohal, would you believe, out came the period card. God will never lead you where his grace cannot keep you.

And so we're going forward in Fear and Trembling. We met with the incumbency committee of the parish in Fear and Trembling. They indicated to us that they were really looking for somebody who was a cross between Russell Crowe and Tom Cruise.

And I sat there expecting they would say, no, we've found such a person. And then they said to me, Paul Barker is not available. So they've got me instead.

[3 : 45] But, well, so I go forward to the parish of Wooden as an ordinary common or garden parish priest. It's a very small parish, but we're trusting God has guided us, and we're looking forward to that very much.

So this is the last time that I'll speak to you as your bishop. And it happens, actually, that it is April Fool's Day. And not that I'm proceeding to carry on like a fool, or I trust I'm not, but Paul, in choosing the reading for tonight, Paul makes reference to foolishness.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For we preach Christ crucified, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

And Paul, in his time, as he proclaimed Christ, and that was clearly the dominant feature of his whole ministry. He had come across the Jews, who considered that to be a stumbling block, and he'd come across the Gentiles, the Greeks, who considered it to be sheer foolishness.

But for Paul, the cross of Christ was the power of God and the wisdom of God. I wonder how long it is since you've been conscious of God telling you that he loves you.

[5 : 09] The other day I was in our cathedral, and there was a lass sitting there in tears, and I happened to be about the only one walking through the cathedral at that time, so I went up to her and sat with her and talked with her.

And in the course of talking with her, I happened to ask her the question of, was she aware that God loved her? And she wasn't at all aware of God loving her.

I actually said to the question, how long is it since God has told you that he loves you, that you really are infinitely precious to him? And she'd never, ever been conscious of God ever telling her that.

But the truth of it is that every time you look at the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, God is saying to you, I love you. Here is God's most eloquent and most exquisite word to you, I love you.

The Jews found it a stumbling block, the Greeks found it madness. But this is God saying to you, I love you. There are a lot of facets of the cross of Christ, but one of the supreme aspects of the cross of Christ is in it we see revealed the love of God in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[6 : 28] And so every time you look at his cross, God is saying to you, I love you like that. For God is showing us that he has done everything that is necessary for you to be forgiven.

God can't overlook our sin and I don't think in a sense we'd want him to. I was reading in the Sunday Age this morning an article about Mr. Cruel, that dreadful murderer, that serial killer who has killed, or raped a number of young women.

And I was reading that he's never, ever been caught. Somewhere, presumably in this city, there is Mr. Cruel, who goes unpunished for those appalling crimes that he has committed, and for the terrible heartbreak and anguish that he has inflicted on so many people.

But he's unpunished. There will come a day when he will stand before God. And you wouldn't want God to look at such a man and say, look, don't worry about your sin, old chap.

I'm not really very fazed about it. Come inside and have a ball in heaven. And let's forget that. In fact, let's not raise the matter of sin. It's a very, you know, most difficult matter to be talking about at this stage.

[7 : 46] Come inside and enjoy. God couldn't overlook our sin. And although we haven't committed the crimes of a Mr. Cruel, nevertheless, when you add up a whole lifetime of sin, there are a fair few tears we've inflicted on other people and an awful lot of anguish we've caused in our day and our generation.

And there is a sense in which we would agree God can't overlook all that. But then when you ask of God the question, God, what do I have to do in order to be forgiven?

The answer that comes from a loving Heavenly Father is you don't have to do anything. You can't do anything. I have done it all for you. I love you like that.

And I have done everything that is necessary for you to be forgiven. And the cross shows us that it costs a great deal to forgive.

That is at the heart of God, as Jesus has revealed it to us. But it costs an enormous amount for God to forgive us. One of the former deans of St. Paul's Cathedral in London tells the story of how he was standing beside the bed of a dying man.

[9 : 02] A young man was dying after many, many years of being off the rails and causing untold heartbreak to so many people, particularly his parents.

And throughout his life, he lived this profligate life. And as a result of all that, he had swindled his parents out of their life savings.

And it would seem that it was that that caused his father to have a heart attack, indeed a fatal heart attack. And the dean of St. Paul's stood beside his bed as he lay dying.

And on the other side of the bed stood his mother, a dear and lovely Christian woman. And as this young man lay there and they were making conversation, after a time the young man looked up at his mother and said to her, Mum, can you forgive me?

And his mother looked down at him and with tears in her eyes said, Yes, son, I forgive you. But the dean said he then looked at this lovely face of this man's mother.

[10 : 11] And you could see in her face what it cost to forgive. Her hair had turned prematurely grey and there were wrinkles throughout her face. And the strain of those ears was so evident in that beautiful face.

It had cost her an enormous amount to stand by his bed and say, Yes, son, I forgive you. There have been many mothers whose sons have become delinquent.

And when that happens, some mothers reject their son and, as it were, kick them out. Get out, get out, get out. Don't have anything more to do. And they toss them out and they're able to simply cocoon themselves round and shield themselves from all that.

And they live a life which is completely shielded from what their son or their daughter may well be doing. And that sort of attitude, if you like, shields you from the heartbreak.

And it shields you from all the tears. But there are other mothers who, when their son goes off the rails, as it were, goes on loving, continuing to love, always holding open the door, always longing that the son will turn and will come back, always hoping, always making excuses, always holding out the hope that that boy will return.

[11 : 31] Now that attitude costs a great deal. It's the difference between bearing a person's sin and rejecting them and casting them away.

Now, God bears our sin. God doesn't cast you out. God doesn't, as it were, reject you and turn you out.

God goes on holding open the door, like the father and the prodigal son, standing at the door, always looking down the path, longing and praying and hoping that the son will turn and will come back and find the full hospitality of the house.

And there have been many mothers who have known the joy and the great rejoicing as their son comes home and they kill the fatted calf. Such an attitude can lead to triumph.

There's power in that. And St. Paul is talking about, for us, this is the power of God. And there have been people who, because that is God's attitude and it is revealed to us in the cross of Christ, have turned and have come home and have been received into the house and the fatted calf has been killed and the ring's gone on the finger.

[12 : 47] And great has been the rejoicing. And the cross shows us that there's no limit to that love of God. Our Lord Jesus Christ, if you think about it, loved right through to the end.

He never, ever turned to hate. Never did his love turn to hatred. Although they mocked him and scourged him, although they crucified him, he never turned to hate.

And I ask you now for your reflection and for your meditation. Can you hear God now speaking to you through the cross of Christ and saying to you, there is nothing that you can ever do that will stop me loving you.

Nothing you may ever do will ever stop me loving you. Even if you were to betray me for 30 pieces of silver, I will still go on loving you.

Even if you were to deny three times on oath that you even know me, I will go on loving you. Even if you mock me and scorn me and turn against me, I will go on loving you.

[13 : 57] Even if you break my heart and destroy me, I will go on loving you. Even if you were to crucify me, I will go on loving you.

There is nothing that you can do that will stop me loving you. You are so precious that I will do anything just for you. I will even give my son to die for you, even while you are sinning and disobeying and flaunting all that I ask of you.

I like to think that if I were persecuted for my Christian faith, and I was asked this the other day, I've been interviewed a bit now, I'm a bishop and leaving. You can be 16 and a half years as a bishop and no one will ask you very much.

When you announce you're going, you'll be interviewed. And I was being interviewed. And the interviewer got into the matter of my Christian faith and how firmly convinced I was in relation to it.

I would like to think if I were persecuted for my Christian faith, I would hold firm that I'm a convinced Christian and yes, that I could bear with persecution and indeed torture and hang on and I wouldn't want to deny our Lord Jesus Christ.

[15 : 17] I like to think that. But having said that, if they were to take my two sons, Andrew and David, and start to torture them, if they really began to put Andrew and David through sheer hell, then that really would start to get to me, their father.

I think that would really begin to eat me totally up. And I say all that because one of the beautiful insights from St. John is that God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

It's very common among those who engaged in counselling to encounter folk wrestling with their Christian faith. and as you talk with them you discover that they're having difficulty in accepting that God loves them.

And then as you dig further and deeper into it you discover that God, they feel God can't love them because of some awful sin that they've committed in the past.

Some dreadful thing they may have done which haunts them even though I've asked for forgiveness for it many, many times. It just still seems to occur and God couldn't possibly love me because of what I've done way back there in the past.

[16 : 37] Well what God is saying to you in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is that there is nothing that you may have done that will put you outside the love of God. Nothing that you could have done.

God will go on loving you. Now that was a stumbling block to the Jews that the Messiah who came to reveal that should be crucified. it was madness to the Greeks but for Paul there was great wisdom in that.

There was enormous power as he'd seen lives being changed. Because that's why nothing else but the cross of Christ would do. If Jesus had refused at some point to go on loving if at some point he'd said look I'm drawing a line in the sand and that's it.

If you cross that line in the sand then you're out. I'll cast you out. There's no line in the sand with the cross of Christ. He would just go on loving and loving because he loved to the end.

He took everything they could heap on him and he never ever turned to hate. God loves you like that. God loves you as though you were the only one in the world there is to love.

[17 : 45] The last thing I'd notice about this is that it shows how God conquers evil. Jesus silently accepted all that they wanted to heap on him and he never ever hit back.

Some years ago there was a Christian psychiatrist Dr. Paul Tournier who was writing a number of books arising out of his psychiatric practice.

I remember in one of his books he talked about a patient that he was treating. A young boy had been brought to him who was absolutely incorrigible. no one could do anything with him and he was the despair of his parents.

And he became a patient of Dr. Paul Tournier's. And Dr. Tournier in this book describes how he began to treat this young man and in fact got nowhere with him at all.

And then one day an incident happened which Dr. Tournier says was the breakthrough. It was the window which he was able to see and begin to treat this young man.

[18 : 47] And what happened was that in the family at home they had a lovely golden Labrador dog. A beautiful animal. And one day in a temper tantrum the young boy began to kick the dog.

And he kicked and belted the dog mercilessly. And all the time the dog didn't move it just lay there and accepted everything that this boy began to heap upon him.

And when he'd got the tantrum out of his system and had kicked this dog so appallingly the dog crawled across the floor and it had been injured internally and began to lick the boy's leg.

And the boy looked down and apparently there was blood all over his leg. And suddenly the boy burst into tears. And Dr. Tournier says that was the breakthrough.

It took the love of an injured dog which didn't hit back didn't retaliate just simply accepted it all to become the window through which Dr. Tournier was to begin to see inside this young man.

[19 : 53] And I say it all because there have been many who have found in their life they have kicked God. They have belted God mercilessly for one reason or another.

And all the time God hasn't kicked back. He hasn't returned at all. Rather he's just gone on accepting it all. And that's what he shows you supremely in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God will never hit you back. It's been well said that when you kick God in the face then his only concern is to how much you have hurt your foot.

God loves you so much that whatever you're doing and however you're carrying on right now God is longing that you might return so that he can offer you the full hospitality of the house and take you into all the blessings he longs to bestow on you.

That is the cross of Christ. Now Paul had the constant frustration for the Jews it was a stumbling block. For the Greeks it was madness. But as he's preached it he found it to be the power and the wisdom of God and people's lives were challenged.

[21 : 02] This is my last address to you as your bishop. I thank Paul for choosing this reading tonight because what I'm doing again is holding up before you one aspect one aspect of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's my prayer that tonight God will speak to you and if at the moment you are holding back on God if there is a sense in which you haven't given him your everything then look again at just how much God loves you and how he longs to take you into his hospitality and give you countless blessings as you walk with a loving heavenly father.

It's my prayer that tonight you will allow the cross of Christ to be burnt indelibly into your mind as I hold up the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ to the Jews a stumbling block to the Greeks folly but to those of us who are being saved it is the power and the wisdom of God in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

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