

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2020**  
*1 Cor 1: 18 – 31; Matt 5: 1 - 12*

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the cleverness of the clever.’ Where is your wise man now, your man of learning, or your subtle debater – limited, all of them, to this passing age?”<sup>1</sup>

That is Paul writing to the Christian community in Corinth 20 years or so after the death of Jesus – and writing to us here too, all these years later.

It appears that Paul has no time for the clever people of this world, the learned, or the articulate. Paul has had enough of experts.<sup>2</sup>

They had disrupted the Christian church he founded in Corinth by distracting its members with articulate preaching and wise words and educated thinking. The congregation had broken into factions and followed these clever men with their clever words, rather than following Jesus Christ and the wisdom of God. Paul has had enough of experts.

Should we take heed of Paul's thoughts on experts? Should we have no time for cleverness and the wisdom of the world? Well, whenever I go to see a doctor, I hope I'm seeing an educated one, not some quack. If I ever need a lawyer, I hope that she is clever enough to have gained the relevant qualifications. When I fly in a plane, I hope the mechanics who serviced the engines were paying attention when they were learning their trade and not sleeping on the job. I hope that my son Aidan is being taught by clever teachers not fools. When they take decisions, I pray our politicians have had an education that helps them make wise choices, and are articulate enough to make their case in Parliament.

Paul may be scornful of his world's cleverness, wisdom and learning, but my world needs the clever, the educated and the articulate to make it a healthier, more prosperous, and a safer place to live in. So, I hope that Paul, one of the inspirations behind the founding of Christianity, and a very clever man himself, wasn't being *too* scornful about education and cleverness when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth.

Perhaps, reading this as people who have had an education ourselves, who respect those who hold qualifications, and who recognise the difference between a clever decision and a stupid one, we might think that Paul just got carried away in his enthusiastic contempt for this world's self-appointed experts.

Perhaps, all Paul had meant to say was that you Corinthians, and us too, should not be led astray by the eloquent words of philosophical Greeks, the insightful theology of believing Jews, or the discernment of clever teachers. They argued that the truths of the Christian faith could be revealed by close philosophical argument, or could be discovered by revealing theological understanding of the Old Testament, or that the truths of Christianity are waiting to be unlocked if you find the clever, wise person able to provide you with the key to its mysteries.

Had science been a separate discipline in his day, as it is in ours, I think Paul would have added the expertise of scientists to his scornful contempt of clever Greek philosophers and wise Jewish theologians.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 1: 20

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/michael-gove-trouble-experts>

Perhaps, Paul only meant to say that this squabbling church shouldn't descend into factional argument between rival camps of knowledge: philosophy, theology, science. But, in his frustration at their disunity he became carried away and through the baby out with the bath water. Perhaps, all he was trying to say was that all this cleverness and wisdom of the world is all very well, but you need to focus on Jesus Christ and find your unity as a congregation in him.

Perhaps so, but Paul goes much further than just criticising members of a church who might have been misled by eloquent argument. He points out, at length, the stark contrast between the substance of the Christian faith and the substance of knowledge and culture that the Corinthian Christians lived amongst.

For Paul, the salvation offered by Jesus Christ was fundamentally different to the salvation offered by the world. Furthermore, there is no way, Paul is arguing, that the salvation offered by Jesus Christ will ever look clever and wise in the eyes of the world.

To the Greeks, for example, the words of Jesus like those from his sermon on the mount which we also read this morning, were philosophical nonsense.

For the Romans, in whose world Paul and the Corinthians lived, the worship of a crucified man who preached virtue through poverty was utterly dishonourable. To the Jews, the religious tradition that Paul and the Corinthians came from, Jesus' sacrilegious law bending, his claim to be the Messiah, and his resurrection were all just bad theology. We might add from our day that, from a scientific point of view, belief in God appears utterly foolish; the world and the universe weren't created in six days.

What Paul was describing to his Corinthian readers is today mainstream. The world often views Christianity as not very clever or very wise.

In response, instead of trying to bolster his position and to meet the challenge and the standards set by the world's clever, wise and educated people, Paul doubled-down and tried to turn the tables.

This 'divine folly,' he argued, is actually 'wiser than the wisdom of man, and this divine weakness [of the cross is actually] stronger than man's strength.' After all, he wrote, how much do you Corinthian Christians really benefit from the wise, the clever and the honourable? Does the Roman code of honour and glory make you feel pride, or does it make you feel like a second-class citizen? Has the religious lawbook ever increased your enjoyment of life, or is it just there so that others can rule over you? Has Greek philosophy been written with you in mind, or is it just aimed at the 'first-world problems' of the comfortable and the complacent?

What's more, he wrote, '... to shame the wise, God has chosen what the world counts folly, and to shame what is strong, God has chosen ... mere nothings.' He is asking the Corinthians - should clever experts be the ones who decide everything on your behalf, or should you not have a say in your own salvation, no matter how uneducated you are? He asks, what role should we, who are not experts or clever or wise play in deciding what we want for our own lives, what kind of a world we want to live in, how we want to live?

Thank God that scientific cleverness will help the world survive the outbreak of the coronavirus. We wouldn't do without the cleverness of science. But, salvation is not a truth revealed through the wonders of science. Thank God that through the wonders of the printed and spoken word we can discover much about the world and ourselves and communicate it to

others. But, salvation is not an argument to be won with clever words or reasoning. Who doesn't want to receive an education good enough to avoid poverty and wise enough to avoid looking like a fool? But, salvation isn't found in power, status or wealth.

Salvation isn't found in cleverness, wisdom or honour, said Paul, it is found in the self-sacrificing, humiliating, rule-breaking stupidly obedient crucifixion of Jesus. On the cross, Jesus, Paul argued, wasn't offering expert advice, he was personally identifying with our lives, our sufferings, our deaths to show us what the one definitive and necessary thing is that we need in our lives that will save us.

If you walk in to the chief executive's office of any successful and well-managed firm, or if you walk in to a polling station during any election, or if you walk in to the surgery of any popular doctor, or the sanctuary of any flourishing church, for example, you'll find that the most successful manager, the most popular politician, the most miraculous doctor, or the most effective minister is not necessarily *the cleverest* person in the room.

The most successful manager, the most re-elected politician, the most miraculous doctor and the most effective minister is most likely to be the person who has the ability *above all else* to listen to, empathise with, understand, and appreciate the lives and the needs of their workers, their voters, their patients or their parishioners. Even in science, you might want the well-educated and clever people searching for a vaccine to the coronavirus, but for certain you also want those carrying out the clinical trials to be observant, empathetic, sympathetic and appreciative of the lives of those on the trial, and those who will subsequently take the drug.

People value cleverness in political decision-making, but they vote for the politician they can most identify with. Workers benefit greatly from clever managers, but they'll work hardest for someone who treats them with respect and doesn't bully them. A minister may be brilliantly clever in the pulpit, but if he doesn't sit in your home with you when you're bereaved, why bother listening to a word he has to say? If I go to see a doctor, I may be in the hands of a brilliant clinician, but if her bedside manner is rubbish, she may never get to the root of my problems.

Cleverness is all very well, but if you're looking for someone to help you, or a politician to lead you, a financier to manage your money, a lawyer to get you out of a fix, or if you are looking for a Messiah to save you, you want one who understands what it is to be human, what *your* life is like, as much or perhaps even more than one who is clever enough to create the sun, moon and stars.

When Jesus laid out his manifesto for the good life - the Beatitudes that we read this morning in the Gospel - he disregarded cleverness and intelligence. Instead he said that it is those who struggle to keep communities together and life dignified who are truly wise, who are truly clever enough to save others. It is those who mourn what has passed; who stand-up for justice; who are kind to others around them; who show mercy when someone makes a mistake; who have a pure heart not a clever brain; who seek to resolve disputes not take advantage of them, who can save you. They are the blessed ones who are doing God's will, and who are truly clever enough to build a better world in which you will find salvation - the kingdom of God.

Wisdom, cleverness and intelligence are important. The application of these things will make people's lives better, safer and healthier. But, wisdom, cleverness and intelligence alone will never change the world for the better for good. To do that you need to be able to be foolishly self-sacrificing and loving enough to empathise with the struggles and the hardships of other people.

That is why, to summarise Paul's words to us today, Jesus didn't go to university to earn a degree in order to become an expert in salvation and on how to live well; he went to the cross to be crucified in order to show us how much he was prepared to love and sacrifice in the cause of living well.