

Downing Place United Reformed Church
Sunday 2nd February 2020 Sermon

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Micah 6: 1-8; 1 Corinthians 1: 18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

You wander into a jewellers shop. You're looking for a new necklace. Something striking, perhaps. The assistant goes to the counter and brings you over a tray of necklaces, in gold and silver. "What sort of thing are you looking for?", they ask you. "We've got these lovely ones with little dangling electric chairs, or would you perhaps prefer one with gallows? A guillotine, perhaps?"

We might shudder. Who in their right mind would wear an instrument of torture around their neck?! It would be grotesque.

And yet, every time we wear a cross, we are wearing a depiction of an instrument of torture. Perhaps the cruellest, more inhumane instrument of torture there was, for people could be nailed up there to a cross for days before they slowly, ever so slowly, died from suffocation.

Given what the cross represented in the context of the Roman Empire to those who were occupied by it, it is no wonder that St. Paul tells us that this seemed a "stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks". Who in their right mind would think that a man being tortured to death might be the ultimate revelation of God, and God's love for us, and an event which transforms life in the world for good is madness? It is at first glance preposterous. And yet that is exactly what Paul is claiming in this letter to the young Church in Corinth. A Church which seemingly is more concerned with its own inner power struggles than it is with grappling with the consequences of this preposterous good news.

The early Jesus movement was deeply subversive. It turned upside down the expectations of its day. The occupied nation of Israel looked for a military Messiah who would liberate them from oppression. Rome thought the brutal maintenance of power glorious. Schools of philosophy or rhetoric prized the beautiful expression of rational thought. Right into the midst of that lands this ugly tool of the torturer, the cross – and Paul has the nerve to tell us that that is the centre of everything. In almost every conceivable way, it turns upside down and inside out anything that we might think of as common sense or received wisdom. To use, or possibly misuse, a term that perhaps befits this LGBT history month, Paul is queering the gospel.

Queer theory – to simplify hugely something which tends towards massive over-complexification, is that that branch of critical theory that seeks to examine the world from a different perspective, that of the one who is not part of the heterosexual norm, to thereby see things that otherwise might not be perceived. It deconstructs monolithic social norms and presuppositions to see things from the perspective of forms of human experience that frequently do not find a voice. As a field of academic enquiry, it might be relatively recent, but as a mode of engaging with the world, it has its ancient counterparts. I'd argue that one such is precisely St. Paul saying to us that at the centre of everything stands an instrument of torture and murder, and the death of an innocent one. He asks us to view the world from that perspective, not the perspective of the religious or the state powers of his day that put that man to death. Foolishness is indeed, perhaps, the word. All the more so, when what he is seeking to convey to those listening to him is that strung up on that cross was one who was God Godself – this was the Lord, the one through whom all things had been created and come into being. The very creator of the world, we tortured to death. As a starting point for one's perspective on things, one can perhaps understand why the disciples of Christ did not in their early days run the risk of becoming a populist movement.

These words from Paul come immediately after he has taken the Church in Corinth to task for their divisions, divisions in part caused by their disagreement over who was their rightful leader and rightful teacher. The desire of human beings to have one strong human leader to whom they look is great, and human's ability to turn to discord and violence about who that leader should be is strong. Paul is in the strongest possible terms trying to turn them away from the thought that anyone, including him, might be their worldly leader, and instead pointing them to Jesus and the cross. As he will go on to say immediately after the passage, we heard read this morning, "I decided to know

nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified". The Corinthians are being invited to look at the world from the perspective not of who is their strong human leader, but from the perspective of a God who was nailed to a cross, convicted as a common criminal.

The last week or so has brought various bits of sobering news. We have marked the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, as we called to mind on holocaust memorial day the industrial scale murder that saw the death of millions of Jews, gypsies, disable folk and, of course, folk like many of us here today, who would have been forced to wear that pink triangle. We lived through that moment of Brexit, which has so deeply divided the nation, a movement which all too often seems rooted in visions of a past that never was and the glorification of a national greatness that smacks of the suppression of others 'not like us'. We've heard Statements from the House of Bishops of the Church of England – and a subsequent apology – that has caused huge hurt and upset for pre-empting the outcome of careful and painstaking conversations that have been taking place to try and shift the way that denomination speaks of sexuality, gender and marriage. A statement all the more bizarre for the fact that many of the bishops supposedly behind it have made it very clear they don't believe it. And it certainly cannot claim to represent the settled opinion of the church universal – for here we are this morning, marking LGBT history month in a church building registered for conducting same-sex marriages. One can only presume that the desire to be seen to speak with one voice in the public realm overcame the desire to be honest – for the truth is that the House of Bishops is as divided amongst itself as the wider church is.

St. Paul's injunction that the cross stands at the heart of everything points to where the Christian faith might find its perspective on much of this. Not of course, that the Church is always very good at living up to that – St. Paul is writing to Corinth because things have reached a pretty appalling state of affairs there, much as they might sometimes in the House of Bishops, much as they might here at Downing Place even, because we are all human and flawed and fail and stand in need of God's forgiveness. But nonetheless Paul reminds us that we are indeed to look at everything from the point of view of the cross. The point of view of the God-man condemned to death unjustly, not the point of view of the religious and political authorities that put him there. And so we view the holocaust through the lens of those who suffered gross inhumanity, and so we view Brexit through the lens of those who feel their future has become deeply insecure and unsettled as they continue not to be able to get the settled status ap to accept their details as it's supposed to. And we view the lens of the Bishop's statement from the perspective of the couple who despite the odds uphold one another in love, build up society around them, and who are not second best; or the perspective of the single parent, sacrificially creating an environment in which their children can flourish, which the bishops graciously agree might just be better than those children being in institutional care...

The liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez talks about 'God's preferential option for the poor' – a theme which runs through scripture. It runs through the law and the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures, and, as we've heard this morning, is central to the teaching of Jesus. One cannot but see the gospel this way when one looks through the lens of the cross. The gospel is always about looking at the world from the point of view other than power and might and wealth. It queers the values of the world, just as LGBT history month queers history, and brings to light wondrous folk whose stories have been hidden and suppressed, and teaches us to read history from a radically different point of view to that from which we normally see it.

To live cross shaped lives, to see the world from the perspective of the cross is, perhaps, to live in the way that the prophet Isaiah called God's people to live. It is with his words that I shall conclude. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Amen.