

Sermon for Sunday, Jan. 29, 2022
Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany, Year A
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A few weeks ago,
we began using a different translation of the Bible in worship,
the Jerusalem Bible.

Our “default” translation in the Episcopal Church,
the one we usually use
and the one you’ll most commonly hear
in any Episcopal church on any given Sunday,
is the New Revised Standard Version,
or NRSV for short.

Reading a different translation from time to time
is a good way to shake up our routine,
to help us encounter God’s Word anew.
Sometimes a slightly different turn of phrase
can open up new insights for us into the message of the scriptures.

Though our passages for this morning are familiar to me,
they struck me in a new way through this different translation,
particularly the Epistle and Gospel readings.

In the Epistle, the Apostle Paul is writing to the church at Corinth,
reminding them that
“God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,
and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” (1 Cor. 1:25).
That line is translated the exact same way in the Jerusalem Bible
as we’re used to hearing it in the NRSV.

But verse 20 is the one that leapt off the page at me on this reading:
“God has shown up the foolishness of human wisdom.” (1 Cor. 1:20)

The NRSV says, “God made foolish the wisdom of the world.”
It’s the same general point, but there is some “oomph” in the way the Jerusalem
Bible translates this line that is missing in the NRSV.

“God has shown up the foolishness of human wisdom.”

God hasn't just “made the world's wisdom foolish,”
God has **SHOWN UP** the foolishness of human wisdom.
God has illustrated through God's actions
how what we tend to think of as wisdom is actually quite foolish.

We human beings tend to revere strength, power, prowess.

But God came among us as a helpless baby,
then proceeded to allow himself to be executed with criminals
rather than lead mighty armies in battle against his adversaries.

“Preaching a crucified Christ,” as Paul puts it,
did not make any sense to either Jewish or Greek audiences.

The Jews expected the Christ, the Messiah,
to be a great king in the line of King David,
and kings had always led Israel into battle against their enemies.

Jesus's name in Hebrew, Yeshua,
is actually the same name as Joshua,
the mighty warrior of the Hebrew Bible
who led the Israelites into the Promised Land after Moses's death.

This is why Paul says that “a crucified Christ” is
to the Jews “an obstacle that they cannot get over,”
because in their understanding, a crucified Christ is no Christ at all.

The Greeks might not have known
about the expectations surrounding the Messiah figure in Judaism,
but as a culture that also valued military prowess,
they would have had a hard time understanding why
this rag-tag band of Jesus followers
wanted to worship someone who had been executed.

But nonetheless, God did what was foolish in the world's eyes
in order to show us another, better way.

When his disciples drew their weapons
to fight back against those who came to arrest Jesus,
Jesus commanded them to put away their swords, saying,
“Those who live by the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

Jesus had already taught his disciples
not to fear those who kill the body
but cannot kill the soul (Matthew 10:28).
By not resisting those who sought his life,
by allowing himself to be killed,
and then returning to life again through his Resurrection,
he “showed up the foolishness of human wisdom.”

We thought, and many of us still think,
that might makes right
that violence must be responded to with more violence,
but Jesus showed the foolishness of this so-called wisdom.

Through Christ crucified, God showed us that that the way to victory
is not through violent conquest
but through nonviolence,
through choosing love for one’s enemies and forgiveness
over retaliation and grudges.
He showed us a way to break the never-ending cycle of violence
that human beings have always been captive to.

It’s a hard lesson, and one that we are still learning
all these thousands of years later,
even those of us who have chosen to follow Jesus
and pattern our lives after his teachings.

We are just as susceptible as anyone else
to embracing human wisdom over God’s wisdom,
which is why Paul was always reminding
the churches he oversaw
that “the human race has nothing to boast about to God” (1 Cor. 1:29),
as he puts it in this passage today.

God chose “those whom the world thinks common and contemptible,”
those whom others think are foolish and weak,
as God’s messengers
in order to remind us that
all power and authority come from God alone,
that we are not wiser or stronger than God.

And when we remind ourselves of that,
when we go back to the words of Jesus on a regular basis
and listen to what he taught,
we are constantly reminded of “the foolishness of human wisdom,”
of how the way we think things are
is often turned on its head in Jesus’s teachings
about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven.

Today’s passage from the Gospel of Matthew is a perfect example of that.
The beatitudes certainly sound foolish by any standards of human wisdom.
“Happy are the poor, those who mourn, those who are persecuted?”
This is the OPPOSITE of what we naturally think
if we rely on our human wisdom.

If human wisdom were speaking
instead of the Word of God through Jesus,
the beatitudes might sound very different.

Human wisdom would tell us:

Happy are the rich, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Happy are the forceful and aggressive, for they will inherit the earth.
Happy are they who have nothing to mourn about,
because they do not need comforting.
Happy are they who are full of what is right,
for they are already satisfied.
Happy are the merciless, for they will not be taken advantage of by others.
Happy are the corrupt in heart, for God helps those who help themselves.
Happy are the warriors, for they fight for God.
Happy are those who are not persecuted, for they will live untroubled lives.
Happy are you when people treat you well and speak well of you
for your service for God.

Hearing the beatitudes this way
makes us realize just how countercultural they are.

Even though we may have gotten used to hearing
“blessed are the poor and those who mourn,”
these “wordly” beatitudes certainly sound familiar
in a different kind of way –
they are more like the messages
we receive and absorb from the world around us
on a daily basis,
and a reminder of how very different the faith of Jesus is.

As a closing reflection,
I’d like to ask you to think of a time
when you did something that others thought was foolish
but that you knew was God’s call to you.

If that doesn’t resonate with your own experience,
imagine what it would be like to do something
that others thought was foolish
but that you knew was God’s call to you.

How does it feel to be seen as a “fool” by others
when you know you are following the right path?
What gives you the strength to continue on
even without the full support of others?

Now take a moment to think of something you view as foolish
in someone else’s actions or beliefs,
and consider whether you might be missing something of God in them.

“God has shown up the foolishness of human wisdom.”
Thanks be to God.