

Sunday 4th March 2018

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: 25 “God is here! As we his people”
 273 “Here hangs a man discarded”
 278 “O Love divine, what have you done!”
 569 “An Upper Room did our Lord prepare”
 455 “All my hope on God is founded”

READINGS: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25
 John 2: 13-22

“A STUMBLING BLOCK”

This week we have seen a lot of stumbling! The snow, the ice, huge mounds of snow hiding the contours of the ground beneath – all have caused us to stumble and for some people to stumble and fall. Throughout the Bible there is a recurrent use of this term ‘stumbling’ and especially the idiom, ‘stumbling-block.’ In the Old Testament in the Book of Leviticus, in the midst of series of laws relating to the treatment of others, this injunction occurs, ‘do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling-block in front of the blind. Obviously putting a rock or any obstacle in front of a blind person is cruel in the extreme.

In the New Testament we see this practical Old Testament law being turned into a spiritual metaphor. In the Gospel of Matthew we read of Peter rebuking Jesus at the point where Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to suffer and die on a cross. Jesus responds to Peter by saying, ‘get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me – for you are setting your mind on human interests not on God’s.’ Peter tried to make Jesus stumble on his God-given path to the Crucifixion.

Most of the references to ‘stumbling blocks’ in the Gospels relate to someone who puts an obstacle or hindrance – physical or spiritual –in the way of another person’s relationship with God. Perhaps the best known passage relates to the disciples and their treatment of children. Jesus’ response to their trying to send children away was to say, whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble, it would be better for that person to have a millstone hung around their neck and be drowned in the depth of the sea.’

Refraining from being a stumbling block means not leading another into sin or not putting a barrier or obstacle in the way of another’s faith.

However, in our reading from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, the word ‘stumbling-block’ is used in a slightly different way. Let us listen again to the relevant passage, “but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles, foolishness” The very idea that the Messiah would or could be crucified was a serious barrier to the Jews because it completely ‘tripped up’ their notion of what a

Messiah should be like. For Jews the long-awaited Messiah would come in power and great glory from God, would release the Jewish nation from the political oppression of the Romans and restore the pride of the Jewish nation. The idea of the Messiah being killed, being treated like a common bandit and crucified was unthinkable – it was a stumbling block to their recognition of Jesus as God’s anointed Messiah.

Many Jews had pretty much accepted that Roman rule was better than what had gone on before. It had, at least, brought peace and quiet throughout the Empire. They did not want to rock the boat. So we see in our reading from John that when Jesus overthrew the tables in the Temple and threatened to destroy the Temple itself, the Jewish leaders were alarmed. This Jesus was a political disturber of the peace. As shall remind ourselves in Holy Week, it was a combination of the Jewish religious leaders, the Jewish local political leaders and the Roman Governor, Pilate who sent Jesus to his Cross.

However often we hear the narrative of the events of Good Friday, however much we read and research, we just cannot see it from the point of view of the Jews of that time. We have crosses in our churches and as jewellery around our necks. That could never have happened in 1st century Palestine. The Cross was the symbol of the most cruel form of death sentence perpetrated by the Romans. Roman citizens were never crucified – it was a form of death reserved for outlaws and bandits. Crosses were set up on high places and at crossroads as a warning to passers-by of what would happen to those who resisted the power of Rome. The very notion that God’s Messiah would be killed by Rome and killed in this ignominious way on a cross was a stumbling block to Jews, who believed that this could not happen to God’s Messiah.

The American evangelist, Billy Graham, died last week aged 99 years. In mat 1958 he preached about the cross and on why it offends people even now. “I can preach anything else,” Graham said, “and it is called popular, it pleases the ear. But when I come to the heart of Christianity, when I come to the cross – that is the stumbling block. That’s the thing people do not want to hear.” He continued, “the expression, ‘the offence of the cross’ sounds strange to modern ears because, you see, we have a beautiful cross inside our church. We have crosses on the lapels of our coats, around our necks, embossed on our Bibles. We never think of this cross as a scandal or an offence. And yet the Bible says it is. It is a scandal. It is a base and despised thing.”

Like Billy Graham in Los Angeles or London, Paul faced a highly sceptical audience in Corinth. Corinth, a major port city in the Roman Empire – a crossroads of people and ideas. Paul knew he had two major groups in his audience – Roman citizens, people of ideas who valued wisdom and the pursuit of knowledge. To them the idea of a god on a cross was pure foolishness, not worth a moment’s consideration and for the Jews it was much more than that – a scandal and a stumbling block.

For Paul and his fellow apostles, the cross had become the benchmark, the criterion for a true grasp of the reality of our world. For Paul the cross redefined the entire ordering of the whole of creation – it had overturned what humans considered ‘normality.’

Paul had to try to convince the Jews and the Gentiles of Corinth of his new and profound conviction about Jesus' life and ministry. That conviction was that despite ending in apparent failure, Jesus' death on the cross was, in fact the greatest victory that could possibly be – the triumph of love through death, the triumph of light over darkness and the victory of life over death.

As we set our minds and hearts to look forward to Good Friday and Easter Sunday we need to engage again with the fact that Jesus was executed as a common criminal on a cross, to realise that it was indeed God himself who died for us there. No wonder other baulk at this idea – for we, ourselves, baulk at it too. It is such a challenging idea for us to grasp that ordinary language fails us – we need poetry to come anywhere close to fathoming the depths of what happened.

Fred Pratt Green, the Methodist hymn writer, in his hymn, 'Jesus in the olive grove' tries to express the profundity of what happened on the cross.

“It is God himself who dies!
God in man shall set us free:
God as Man – and only he.

Let him claim us as his own
We will serve as best we can
Such a God and such a Man!”

The message of the Cross is not a system of thought or a way of life – it is God's power at work to save those who cannot save themselves - ourselves – no matter how hard we think or how well we live. That is why we feel uncomfortable about the message of the cross, why it continues to be a stumbling block for us. It punctures our vaunted ambition, all our confidence in ourselves, all our cherished independence and pride in what we think we have achieved.

We find it difficult ... impossible at times to acknowledge that however hard we try we are not the architects of our own salvation. Many sincere Christians have had to learn that lesson. John Wesley himself, whose anniversary of his death fell on the 2nd March, had to discover that difficult truth. All his praying, all his good works were not enough – he had to encounter Jesus and Jesus crucified – in a personal encounter and then agree to become a fool for Christ.

As the Apostle Paul says in this passage, “for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.” In other words, 'get things in perspective, you humans, you are the creatures dealing with the creator.'

Paul then goes on to say “consider your own call, brothers and sisters – not many of you were wise by human standards, not many powerful Yet God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is lowly and despised in the world. That's us, isn't it? God chose to reach out to us – he is the source of our life and yet, by the standards of the world most of us could not have expected that to happen to us.

The cross was seemingly foolish to those who did not understand the lengths to which God's love was prepared to go to love us into the kingdom. But just as Jesus told it straight to his disciples and made them aware that they, too, would be called to suffer if they were truly to follow him so for us, the message is clear – following Jesus will not be an easy ride.

Perhaps more than in earlier centuries we who call ourselves Christians in this century will have to be prepared to be ridiculed, to be castigated as spreading toxic ideas to children and to be judged as people who have abandoned all reason. As Jesus had to suffer on his cross so we may be called upon to suffer our crosses too – loss of friends, loss of reputation even loss of our job. Being a follower of Jesus has never been a guarantee of an easy life – quite the opposite. Yet foolish as many might think it is we who know that following Jesus opens up for us the possibility of abundant life now and of sharing in his glory in eternity. Amen