

EPIPHANY 4, Jan. 29, 2017, Year A

"The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing..." (from 1 Cor. 1:18)

- [Readers in 2026: note that this homily was offered in January of 2017. This homily employs an 'antitype' to help us appreciate some things about its positive opposite.]
- The great theologian, Karl Barth, is remembered as having given some advice to preachers ~ 'as you prepare your sermon, hold the Bible in one hand and a good newspaper in the other.' If Barth did indeed recommend this, his point was surely to encourage [connecting two differing things](#), something that's not always easy to do. One such connection we can make today stems from [the role of paradox](#). Paradox abounds in both our Epistle and Gospel readings, and plays a part in our Micah reading. But, these days, we also find paradox much-mentioned in political conversations. Of course, the most-noted paradox in these conversations is the [2016] election of Donald Trump as President.. Not only did *few, if any*, pundits predict his victory, *most assumed he had no chance of winning at all*. By some accounts, even *Trump himself was surprised* at the result. And so, [the most unlikely candidate](#) in a field of [17](#) ends up being the nominee. And [the most error-prone of all candidates](#), who made rash statements that would have ended the political career of anyone else, ends up winning the election against a seasoned professional. Whether we like him or not, and whether we support him or not, people all across the red and blue spectrum are beginning to agree on at least one point. The political landscape in America has *changed* with this election. [Something so thoroughly unexpected](#) appears to have the power to change so much!
- It is just this kind of *sweeping change*, emerging from the most *unlikely* of beginnings, that Paul is getting at in our Epistle reading. At the height of its imperial power, when Rome controlled most of the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, God revealed the Messiah in the most [unpromising](#) way. Let's assume that God wanted Jesus of Nazareth to be *recognized and received* as a great King, even as the Lord of history over against the Caesars. [Why then](#), in divine Providence, would God allow the Messiah to be born in a rural backwater, even if he had some distant and tenuous royal connections? And, more pointedly, [why](#) would God *then* allow him to be *crucified*, under

Roman Law, as if he was a common criminal? Instead of royal palaces, thrones and expensive robes, we meet in Jesus a figure who embodies humility, who has an obvious lack of wealth, along with an absence of worldly power and prestige. These are *not* the attributes we associate with leaders who alter the course of world history. And yet, according to Paul and the Gospels, this is precisely the profile *that God chose*, with which to reveal the divine self when assuming human form. And God allowed this Chosen One to die by a means of execution that was designed to *erase* all traces of a person's existence. *Once again, something quite unexpected in history has had the power to change everything!*

- Let's take this a *step further* ~ according to our usual assumptions about the world, Donald Trump should *never* have become President of the United States. Just so, according to our usual standards for determining what is good and true, Jesus of Nazareth - though vastly different from a fallen human official - should *never* have been the Messiah. In thinking about things in *this way*, we are not really different from the people of the first century, as Paul describes them. Like them, we also want *strong signs*, and we want *compelling wisdom*. Like them, we want *convincing proofs*, and we expect *satisfactory persuasion*. *Nevertheless*, confounding both first century people as well as us, God in Jesus has chosen a *different* way to reveal the most important truths.
- For Paul, a central feature of the New Covenant is how God has chosen *foolishness* as a means by which to communicate *wisdom*. And, that God has chosen *weakness* as a way to convey *power*. Those who have best understood this paradoxical aspect of the message of the New Covenant are often those over the centuries who have accepted martyrdom. At the hands of the world's rulers, they have accepted suffering and death rather than *renounce* their faith, or *water it down* to make it tame and acceptable. And as the recent and very moving film, *Silence*, allows, even some of those who renounced their faith may have experienced another great paradox of the Gospel: the God who "spoke" the world into being, and who has *spoken* to us through the prophets, is also the God who is *silently* present with us in our suffering.

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- The message about the cross is indeed foolishness as compared with our usual means of obtaining influence and having an impact upon others. Think of the way our politicians and world leaders communicate. They look for a stage or a platform; they employ microphones and sound systems; they make sure the media are present in attendance; and they dress in fine clothing. Clearly, Jesus lived in a different world; but he rarely, *if ever*, took this kind of approach with other people, even if he might have blurred some of those lines. *And the paradoxical crowning moment of his life and ministry was when he allowed himself to be forcibly pushed out of this world by a means of punishment intended to obliterate his existence.* As John's Gospel suggests, *the true King of this world was crowned in his crucifixion*, at the hands of the Roman Emperor's servants.¹ This is the paradoxical, or *upside-down*, shape of the Gospel.
- This upside-down aspect of his death is also present in his teaching, which is equally full of paradox. Who can forget statements like, "Those who love their life [will] lose it"?² Or that "the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life..."³ But the most familiar example of Jesus' use of paradox may well be the Beatitudes, which we hear in our Gospel today. What he says in these words can sound a lot like exhortation, as if he was cumulatively saying *this* to us: "*If you want to experience blessedness and get a glimpse of heaven, then try hard to do these things ~ strive for spiritual poverty; accept mourning; be meek; hunger for righteousness*," and so forth. In other words, *do these things*, and *then* you will experience a bit of heaven. Yet, helped by Tom Wright⁴ and others, I have begun to see that Jesus' meaning may be just the *opposite*. Instead of encouraging various spiritual practices *so that we might attain* a resulting blessedness or happiness, I think that Jesus is encouraging us *to live within a paradox*. '*Perceive yourself as already blessed, and you will then find yourself living in these ways!* Imagine that *heaven has already come near*, for it has! And if *heaven has already come near*, then you will find yourself *living in a heaven-shaped way*. *If you believe that blessedness has already touched your life, you will then do these blessed things!*'

- This is what it means to *live* our faith. Faith is not something we *try* to experience, so that we *might then* live in a *different way*. We have been baptized. We celebrate the Eucharist together every Sunday. Through our participation in these liturgies, we know we have *already* been received and *embraced* by God. Knowing that we have been blessed by God's embrace, whether we *feel it or not*, we begin to *live* our Faith in *new ways*. This is what will make us look foolish in the world's eyes ~ that we are willing to believe that God has *already changed the world*. And, that we are willing to live as *if it were already true!*

[Further note, in 2026 ~ another 'antitype': Supporters of Trump have long said that his words should not be taken literally, but seriously. Many of us may often -without due reflection - take words from the Bible literally, but not seriously.]

[Also note how our collect for the day may strike us as having a paradoxical note: "Almighty and everlasting God, *you govern all things both in heaven and on earth*: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (emphasis added)]

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Notes:

¹ This becomes evident as we notice how John speaks of Jesus’ crucifixion as his glorification. See, for example, John 12:28, 13:32, 16:14, 17:1, 5.

² See John 12:25.

³ See Matthew 7:13-14.

⁴ The Bishop and New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, is known to most people by his common name, Tom.