

## **GOSPEL SEEDS**

**APRIL, 2006**

*Biblical reflections to encourage us in the work of evangelisation*

### **THE WISDOM OF A FOOLISH GOD & FOOLISH MINISTRY**

*Since in the wisdom of God the world was unable to recognise God through [its own] wisdom, it was God's own pleasure to save believers through the folly of the Gospel. While the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks look for [human] wisdom, we are preaching a Christ crucified: to the Jews an obstacle they cannot get over, to the Gentiles foolishness, but to those that have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is both the power and the wisdom of God. God's folly is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1Cor1:21-25)*

How can folly be wise and wisdom look like folly? Using folly and weakness as qualities to promote something, in sharp contrast to wisdom and power, would strike most people as unusual. Hardly a winning formula, most advertisers would surely say. Yet this is precisely the paradoxical mysterious approach that Paul used. Why?

#### *Jesus – the Revelation and Ministry of Divine Wisdom*

Biblical Wisdom is a gift from God, if one that man must co-operate with if it is to be fruitful. It has to illumine the mind and be meditated upon. It inspires right conduct and is the art of living well. It leads to real human dignity but one that is founded on the moral law of God, a fear of God and respect for what he has created. It sees things from God's perspective and evaluates them with God's values. Human wisdom may at its best come close to this or at least harmonise with it, being fulfilled and crowned by God's revealed and graced wisdom. However, it can also fall short of this and even oppose it sharply. This is normally seen as godless folly in the Bible though it would see itself much more honourably. It has its own logic, coherence and rewards linked to a world turned in on itself. But Divine wisdom is seen as part of God's Word. It can only be revealed or understood with the Spirit. It comes to be personified and seen as divine. This prepares the way for the coming of Jesus who is a prophet, but more than this. He is also the master of wisdom, using its forms in his teaching, someone with an authority unlike the other teachers of his day. In this he reveals the mysteries of the Kingdom. Yet he is more still. He does more than personify wisdom, he is Divine Wisdom, he is the Word of God made flesh.

#### *Jesus – the Revelation and Ministry of Divine foolishness*

Yet Jesus is judged by many of his own fellow Jews – especially those who were theologically trained or in positions of authority – as a blasphemer or mad or possessed. Far from seeing him as the Divine wisdom they see him as the fool who is misrepresenting God and leading others away from the true path to salvation. The Jewish Scriptures portray Wisdom as sitting down and offering the food and wine of wisdom even to fools (Prov 9:1-6). Not seeing this in Jesus, some prefer to pick arguments with Jesus and, when he literally eats and drinks with them, to accuse him of being a glutton and a drunkard. At that time Jesus adds 'Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds' (Mt 11:19 - 20). It is as though Divine wisdom is revealing a kind of Divine foolishness in contrast to both human foolishness and human wisdom. There is a certain mystery to this. What motivates it? At its heart it speaks of love and the lengths Divine love goes to in order to communicate itself and win us to it.

The approach of Jesus may merit further reflection. Being a fool may say something very important about God and his ways with us. John Drane, whose wife Olive has a ministry as a Christian clown, has reflected on this. In a way Jesus can be seen in the tradition of clowns and court jesters – fools - who have a special role in society. Using humour, they are able to reveal inner truths and the real and deep emotions of people and situations, creating space where self-examination and communication around these are possible. They also resonate and pick up the tragic in life. At the same time, they – especially Christian ones – are respectful. They are vulnerable, weak and able to walk alongside the vulnerable and weak offering them companionship, illumination, hope and challenge. They are able to point out faults in ‘the system’ and to challenge it in real ways – even if they risk and may actually receive ridicule and rejection in the process. At the same time they are figures of joy, simplicity and hope. As such they symbolise both the cross and resurrection.

#### *Divine Folly and Wisdom in Death and Resurrection*

Folly is associated with weakness and we see this in Jesus too. Jesus does not impose his way. He is taken as a blasphemer and naïve fool. Judged as godless, he is then ridiculed, mocked and executed, throughout being made to look and feel a shameful fool in so many ways. Is this a sensible way to establish God’s Kingdom of justice and holiness? It is seemingly full of shame not honour and speaks of a man cursed and forsaken rather than godly and miraculous. It is seen as folly and the result of the foolish path embarked on by Jesus.

Yet wisdom is indeed justified by her deeds! Jesus was raised from the dead, vindicated by his Heavenly Father, and thus judging and reversing the wisdom and power of this ‘world’. He thus brings in a new creation and covenant and an everlasting kingdom of saving justice, holiness, redemption, joy and peace (cf Col 2:15, 1 Cor 1:30 & Rom 14:7). Yet even here is God still foolish and weak? He does not powerfully or gloriously appear to his enemies or the general public. He appears to women and then largely uneducated men. All this is quiet and unobtrusive – hardly a great model or prototype for modern media campaigns. He gives these few friends and followers the task of offering his message and grace to all humanity. He then ‘leaves’ the earth – promising them power from on High. He has no Plan B. What if they should prove too foolish or weak?

#### *Being wise fools for Christ!*

Looking back wisdom is proved by its actions! God takes what the world thinks uneducated and stupid to confound the wise and what is weak to judge and ultimately put down the powerful (1 Cor 1:26-28). God continuously confounds worldly wisdom and often enough religious wisdom too. His followers needed to be aware of their weakness and folly to really receive God’s power and his guidance. But God continued to act as he had in Christ. Their ministry was not about stardom and fame. They had to share in the poverty and weakness of Christ and in his seemingly shameful folly. Then they also shared in his wisdom and power. That is why Paul preaches Christ Crucified with fear and without oratory, relying on the power of God (1 Cor 2:1-5). That is why he is happy to be a fool for Christ and to actually see this as an indication of a Christ-like ministry and therefore an authentic one that will bear fruit (1 Cor 4:1-13).

The relationship between wisdom and folly is truly mysterious but we too are called to be ‘fools for Christ’. Are we prepared to acknowledge the darkness of our folly so as to receive his wisdom and with it grasp the mysteries of the kingdom? Are we prepared to take up the cross of divine folly so as to receive the life of divine wisdom? Are we prepared to be seen

and treated as fools by the world, overcoming embarrassment, while offering it the Word and Wisdom of God? If we are, we will see the fruitfulness of Divine folly that is Divine wisdom – proven in her actions through us!

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