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Spirit of Wisdom (1 Corinthians 2. 1-8, 14-16)

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I want to start this week by thanking so many of you who sent encouraging messages before and after I had the nerve-wracking privilege of preaching at the Ecumenical Service for the opening of the 2023 parliamentary year here in Australia. It was a joy to have members of Benedictus and St Ninian's present in the congregation on Monday, and such a strengthening thing to know that we were in a sense doing it together! Those of you who heard or have read my reflection (it's on the Benedictus website), will know that I spoke on the theme of wisdom and how a wisdom way of knowing, a wholistic kind of perceiving and responding, is connected to the opening of the heart – usually by way of the heart's breaking. And I went on to speak of how growing in wisdom, connecting to our hearts, is critical for our nation's capacity to respond at the necessary depth to the gift we have received of the Statement from the Heart, as well as truly to engage the crises of our age.

The text I drew on was Matthew 5 – the Beatitudes – '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 ...; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ...; blessed are the merciful ...', and so on. But I could also have drawn on the reading we just heard, from St Paul's first letter to the early Christian community at Corinth ... for he is onto the same paradox. The paradox that, in the spiritual life, down is up and the last shall be first. 'When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words of wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling' (1 Cor. 2.1-3).

What's confusing about Paul's argument in this text is that he uses the word 'wisdom' in two ways. When he says, 'I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God

to you in lofty words of wisdom', he's referring to what he later calls 'the wisdom of this world', 'human wisdom', the ways of thinking and communicating that we naturally think are going to make us powerful and impressive and effective in life. By contrast with this human so-called 'wisdom', however, there is what he calls the wisdom of God. This 'is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age', but it is 'God's wisdom, secret and hidden'.

And what is this wisdom, secret and hidden? It is 'Christ crucified'. It is the paschal mystery of death and resurrection. A little before our passage, Paul has written: The 'message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing' [that is, to those who are seeking to live their lives according to the wisdom of this age]. But, he goes on, 'God has 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' who is 'to those who are called 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' (1 Cor. 1.18-25).

This is one of those texts that inclines me to believe in the inspiration of Scripture – for though Paul's argument is typically convoluted, it is also utterly extraordinary! Who would have come up with this by themselves? As he writes, 'we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual' (1 Cor. 2.13). But what is he actually saying?

The enduring proclamation of the New Testament is that the crucifixion of Jesus and the collapse of the hopes associated with him, which looked initially like abject failure, dishonour and pointlessness, was actually the breakthrough into a whole new way of knowing and being in this world. By giving of himself freely, letting himself be handed over, into the place of shame, rejection, powerlessness, terror, pain and death, without bitterness or avoidance, Jesus forged a way and gave us

confidence to follow with him into the darkest, most frightening and painful of our own life experiences. James Alison writes of how Jesus' acceptance of the way of the cross made 'habitable' the place of shame, the place of fear and death. How? Because what started to become visible in the manner of his dying and in what happened afterwards, is that there's a reality, a truth, a power that's not bound by the rulers of this age or the limits of the finite order. Call it resurrection, call it grace.

What looked like foolishness in Jesus' words and actions – totally unwise from the point of view of survival, happiness and worldly success – was thus the deliberate living out and making knowable of the most profound insight into the nature of things. For the secret that's obscured by our instinctive, compulsive drive to secure ourselves against what Jesus suffered, against loss, against each other, against vulnerability, is that – actually – we don't need to do that. Jesus has revealed that the reality in whom we live and move and have our being, and into whom we die, is inextinguishable love.

This doesn't mean we don't suffer in this life – sometimes, it feels, beyond our capacity to bear. But it does mean that suffering is not the final word. And if, however haltingly and sorrowfully, we seek to keep open our hearts in the midst of our suffering, we will come to know for ourselves the wisdom of God – which is compassion, mercy and a peace beyond understanding, which is faith, hope and love. This is the truth Paul has discovered and longs to make real to others. It's a truth that cannot be communicated in the abstract. It can only be shared as we ourselves undergo the same counter-intuitive dying into life. Which is why he knows he cannot communicate the mystery of God in 'lofty words', or by means of his own credentials or success; it can only be spoken by one who has accepted their own vulnerability and weakness, and discovered it held, forgiven, beloved. That's why Paul is determined 'to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified'.

I've been conscious over the past few weeks that many in our Benedictus community, many of you, are undergoing deep and painful things. Some are grieving for loved ones who have died or are dying; some are in the midst of painful

relationship breakdown; some are dealing with the aftermath of abuse or suffering the losses and anxiety that come with ageing and illness; and some are living with uncertainty about their own future as they look for work, for secure housing, for purpose and meaning. Christ crucified – to paraphrase Gerard Manley Hopkins – in ten thousand places. And around the world, there's the ongoing devastation of Ukraine, the catastrophic earthquake in Syria and Turkey, environmental collapse and millions of people on the move in search of food, peace, a place to belong. The foolish wisdom of God seems, in the face of all this, a poor match for the power of this age.

And yet, it is the truth. It is ultimately the ground beneath our feet ... So let us, conscious of our own and the world's weakness, need, fear and grief, turn once again to face the light of life. Let us open our hearts and invite the Spirit of the everliving God to touch us and give us courage to go on.