

Text: 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Bishop Terry, our cathedral hosts, honoured guests, University colleagues, graduands, friends, and family. I also would like to recognise the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I live and work on their unceded lands and waters and have benefited from their forced dispossession. Such knowledge compels me to remain committed to work toward reconciliation and justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

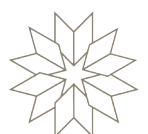
The Apostle Paul determined to come to the Corinthians not with 'lofty words of wisdom' (2:4) but with the simple message of Christ crucified. 'I decided,' he wrote, 'to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.' (2:2) These words have been seen by some as a justification for anti-intellectualism, as if theological education were in the end a waste of time. After all, the simple message of the Gospel ought to be enough.

John Wesley, was once told by an opponent, 'God does not need your education, sir.' With characteristically caustic wit, Wesley replied, 'Certainly, and I thank you for the reminder. Then again, neither does God need your ignorance.' There are many things that are more valuable than formal theological education – faith, hope, and love can all be had without it. Yet to set theological education over against Christian experience is surely a false binary.

Paul's words reflects a deliberate decision he made about the nature of his ministry to the Corinthians. As an educated Pharisee and a highly literate Roman citizen with a natural genius, he could well have brought to the Corinthians a sophisticated message. In the midst of a culture that prized the powers of rhetoric, he made the decision to come to the Corinthians with a simple message of the crucified Christ.

But how simple was his message really? Paul's epistles are brilliantly constructed pieces of Spirit-inspired correspondence which have exercised the greatest intellects and those of lesser abilities alike over two millennia. Certainly, his message was not simplistic. There is of course a very important distinction between 'simple' and 'simplistic'. If something is unnecessarily complex, it may need to be simplified in order to be understood. In such a case 'simple' is a genuine virtue. But if a thing is 'simplistic,' it is inadequate to the task of successfully communicating an idea. It then becomes reductionist, misleading, or simply false. Paul's message might conceivably be thought of as 'simple' but never 'simplistic'. The critical thinking skills you have gained through your study at the University of Divinity have helped you to identify simplistic reasoning in others and to avoid it in your own thinking. At the same time, your prayerful engagement with Christian texts and traditions, ancient and modern, have helped you to recognise the central and yes, simple, message of Christ crucified.

Paul wrote of the mystery of the Gospel as something that had long been hidden but was now being made known (2:6-8). How does one make sense of the idea of proclaiming a mystery? Isn't a mystery something, by definition, hidden? How does one proclaim a secret? The Gospel is not a mystery in the sense that it involves a secret code known only to initiates who may pride themselves on possessing a secret knowledge that unlocks the mysteries of the universe. The Gospel mystery, rather, is something openly declared. It had been kept hidden through the ages but is now revealed. The revelation of the divine nature and purpose has been revealed in a very surprising manner, which the rulers of this world did not and still have not recognised. It was revealed in what Jurgen Moltmann referred to as 'a crucified God.' The cross was a demonstration of both the weakness and the power of God intersecting at the turning point of all time and space. Revealed in the intersecting bars of that cross are both the destruction of the powers of evil and the announcement of the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. This was a simple message but by no means a simplistic one.



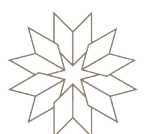
The idea of a 'university' as it emerged in the Middle Ages was built on the assumption that the universe was open to investigation and that in every aspect of it was seen the wisdom of God. The concerns of a university were by definition universal in scope, while being grounded in the particularity of a God with a Name, a God with a history and a God with a people. The decision to know nothing but Christ crucified is not, therefore, a narrowing stance, but rather a universalising one, since in the intersecting bars of the cross of Christ the nature of all things is revealed.

Of course, the recognition of God as at the heart of the university curriculum has now disappeared from most universities. This absence comes not usually from animosity; it is simply the result of the necessarily secular system required by a pluralist society. Here, perhaps, is where the University of Divinity has such an important role to play in higher education. It continues to see God revealed in Christ as at the heart of all things, while opening up the widest possible scope of research to explore and create new knowledge built on ancient wisdom.

In addition to stressing the simplicity of the Gospel mystery, Paul also stressed the weakness of the messenger. He does not boast about his qualifications but about the things that might be seen as disqualifications. He appears to have been a person who lacked confidence in some ways. We don't know what he looked like, of course but there is a strand of tradition that suggests he was a physically unimpressive person. Several scriptural passages suggest he had a sight impairment. Perhaps this was his 'thorn in the flesh'. He was said not to have been a particularly good speaker. However, he saw all these limitations as an opportunity for the power of God to shine through his ministry. 'I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.' (2:3-4) Graduates, despite the accolades you receive tonight, some of you will still struggle with an internal voice of self-doubt that calls your ability into question. Perhaps you also enter into, or continue, your ministry 'in weakness, in fear and in much trembling.' If so, all the better, for it is in the midst of that sense of incapacity that the power of the Spirit is demonstrated.

Despite Paul's weaknesses, he spoke the wisdom of God, a wisdom taught by the Spirit who 'searches everything, even the depths of God.' (2:10) 'We speak of these things,' wrote Paul, 'in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.' (2:13) Though reason is certainly a good gift of God and as such should never be disparaged, the things of the Spirit are learned not solely through a process of logical thought and decision. One must have a certain disposition of the heart. It involves taking a position of listening, of receptivity, of being humble and teachable. So, though much can be learned through education, the heart of the Gospel mystery is ultimately something spiritually discerned. Paul asks the rhetorical question, 'Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' Of course, this invites the response, 'Nobody knows God's mind. No one may instruct God.' True, of course, but his argument continues, 'but we have the mind of Christ.' Having the mind of Christ does not mean losing one's own individuality and identity. Or somehow becoming less human because more spiritual. No. To have the mind of Christ is to have the same attitude as Christ, to be clothed with Christ's love, Christ's meekness, compassion, kindness, and mercy. It is as much about being a certain kind of person as it is about knowing certain things. Similar language is used in Philippians chapter 2, 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,' who humbled himself.

Here again is where the University of Divinity plays such an important role. It understands that learning is more than knowledge acquisition or obtaining a certain set of skills. It involves the spiritual formation of the entire person. But the University is nothing without its graduates and tonight is about celebrating you and all that you



have achieved in your studies. 'God does not need your education,' no. But we do, we who are members of that wider community that is the recipient of your learning, your research, your wisdom, and your pastoral care. Tonight, we welcome you all as our teachers. Show us the way of the crucified Christ in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

Amen.

Reverend Professor Glen O'Brien

