

# A Foolish Cross - A Wise God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, let's pray. Lord God, your word is powerful to make us wise for salvation in Jesus Christ.

So we pray tonight that your Holy Spirit will bring about in each of us the fulfillment of your purpose in your word. That we may indeed be wise and saved through Jesus' death. Amen.

Boxing Day 2005. Not a tsunami, but an epic event nonetheless for this country, so it seemed. The big Australian was dead. It was an intense fascination with Kerry Packer, Australia's richest person, but not just wealth.

It's perhaps Australia's most powerful person in many respects. And part of the fascination about Australia's fascination with Kerry Packer is our fascination with power itself.

[ 1 : 18 ] Power fascinates us. It sometimes concentrates us and all too often captivates us as well. So the quest for money that drives so many thousands of Australians and people around the world is really in many respects a quest and drive for power.

Those who plunge their efforts and life into business, it's often the accumulation of power. We saw that with Kerry Packer. We see that in the Toll and Patrick takeover bid that was just announced on Friday.

It's the same in politics. The quest for power both nationally, the contest for power between the states and the federal government, and then, of course, internationally. The exercise of power by one regime over another internationally as well.

We see the quest for power in family life, in the control over members of family, the manipulation to exercise power over someone else. We see it all too often in church life as well.

Power is an issue that bedevils all sorts of aspects of our relationships, domestic, international, political, business, science, educational, and so on.

[ 2 : 40 ] For most of us, at some point, are driven with an ambition for fame, influence, control. A quest for power for which we go about it in some way or other.

Whether it's fast red cars or whether it's the power of gossip to have information that somebody else does not have. Even things like euthanasia is, in a sense, a quest for power.

For some people just don't like not having control over their own life. And so they rest from God. Power to die. And we love power in sporting scenarios as well.

We love the power of seeing Gilchrist smashing balls around and over the boundary. Or the power of someone like Wayne Carey at his best in AFL football.

I couldn't think of a Richmond example. The power of a safra pal winning a 100-metres sprinting race. And so on.

[ 3 : 48 ] And there's an attraction with some of those great acts of power in the Old Testament, especially by God. The destruction of Pharaoh and Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

The destruction of Jericho and the power that God unleashed then. And of course, there is that appeal and attraction of those powerful superheroes. From Superman, for when you're a child, but through to Schwarzenegger and John Wayne and those sorts of power-type heroes that so often attract us.

It's not a new phenomenon. You see it also in the idolatry of those Greco-Roman statues of their gods. Those powerful, strong, muscly gods of the Greeks and the Romans, sometimes with weaponry, sometimes just standing there in all their brute force.

We are often drawn to power's wow factor in all sorts of spheres of life. Now, of course, power need not be brute force.

There is also a power that is exercised with ingenuity and cleverness, a power in wisdom, we might say. We see that with the quest for power in science and medicine sometimes, to conquer diseases and illnesses, to control life, to clone life, to end life, to begin life, in all sorts of ways.

[ 5 : 21 ] We see it in the same sort of scientific way with the power to Google and the power to blog and whatever those things mean. The power of modern technology.

This power of ingenuity or cleverness or wisdom, I suppose we could contrast that ingenuity power of someone like Shane Warne who beguiles the batsmen with the brute force power of Brett Lee, or actually today Jason Gillespie, with three wickets and a few overs at the start of the Bangladesh innings.

And again, in Greco-Roman culture, there's not only the exaltation of the brute force power we see still in the remains of those statues, but that esteem they had for lofty rhetoric, for ideas and philosophy and words.

And we still see it in superheroes, not only those brute force ones I've mentioned like Superman, but the clever superheroes, the Sherlock Holmes, the Inspector Morse and so on, who use their little grey cells.

Well, that's Poirot, but you know what I mean. There's the power of brute force and the power of wisdom. They produce their own sorts of heroes. And even in church life today, there is still sometimes this pursuit of power in force or wisdom.

[ 6 : 42 ] Sometimes the power of miracles, of healing, of great numbers, the power of influence of a church over other churches or over communities. The power sometimes in the pulpit that's exercised with sophisticated scholarship or unfathomable mystery.

Sometimes in some churches, it's the power of human ability. You can do it. Positive thinking, that sort of power as well. And sometimes that quest for power and wisdom is seen in the way churches parade the great and famous who claim faith.

We see it when there are big rallies on. We wheel out the famous sporting stars or great gurus of science or politics who claim to be Christian as though somehow their own high and lofty status and success in life demonstrates power and wisdom.

Often the boast of power or the boast of wisdom is what drives churches and what drives preachers as well. There is actually a third category of hero.

The brute force ones, the clever ones, but there's also the sort of anti-hero in a way, the unexpected hero, the bumbling, incompetent, accidental hero.

[ 8 : 00 ] Notably people like Inspector Clouseau or Maxwell Smart, people like that. Jesus fits none of these three categories of hero simply and easily.

He's far from a comic accidental hero. That's the one category that he really doesn't fit into at all. And yes, there was some power on some occasions with miracles and healing and calming of storms and so on, and they were powerful and awesome events.

And there's certainly wisdom and cleverness in his teaching, in his rebuttal of the Pharisees and Sadducees and others. But when it comes to the very heart of the Christian faith, what actually saves us is not in a sense a show of power, a great miracle of power.

And we're not saved by the cleverness of his teaching either. For at the heart of the rescue where we need a hero, he died.

We're so familiar with the account that we're immune to its shock. The cross of Christ is scandalous. It is offensive and it is madness.

[ 9 : 24 ] It is a preposterous humiliation to think that God incarnate should die to rescue us.

Weak, shameful, impotent, disgraced, nailed to a tree. God incarnate?

That's a scandal. To think that God incarnate was perceived to be an abject failure, a pitiable waste of life, scorned, mocked, spat upon, killed by human beings.

That's outrageous to think. And yet that naked, dead corpse, as he was, we worship.

Are we mad? Have we lost our minds? Not just admire him, hanging on the cross, thinking, what a great admirable person this was.

[ 10 : 36 ] No, not just admiration, but worship. Not just respect for who he was and what he taught and his challenge to the authorities. No, not just respect but worship.

Not that we just feel sad for him, thinking, what a waste. Wouldn't it have been good if he got to his three score years and ten? No, we worship him. The one who was crucified for us.

For when we arrive in heaven, remember, that on the throne of heaven, around whom we will gather, is a lamb slain.

A bit like Sunday roast. Not meaning so much a joke as to force the issue of the madness, surely, of worshipping a slain lamb.

See, no wonder Jews and Muslims to this day think that the cross of Christ is outrageous, scandalous, and abhorrent. No wonder that liberal Christians to this day ridicule the naivety of evangelical belief in the centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ.

[ 11 : 56 ] No wonder that the pagans in our streets show such disdain and contempt for the name of Jesus Christ, for whom he's little more than a swear word.

No wonder that the atheists of our world downright reject such an idea that God would save in that way.

You see, the cross of Jesus Christ remains a scandalous stumbling block. No one in their right mind could dream up a hero that would save so powerfully by dying so abjectly on a cross.

A crucified Messiah, that's an oxymoron, like fried ice. It doesn't exist, does it?

A crucified Messiah, it's nonsensical madness. If you ever play chess, you know that if you make a queen sacrifice, you've probably made a mistake.

[ 13 : 04 ] That is, it's not wise thing to do to sacrifice your queen in effect almost the most important piece for the sake of trying to gain an opponent's other piece.

If you make a king sacrifice, you lose. The cross is the king sacrifice that wins.

It's the gospel gambit and it works. It's not in the rule books, it's not in the expectations, but that's what it's all about.

The king sacrifice that works. And it's a scandal and a stumbling block. And don't try to edge out of thinking that way by saying, well, yes, Good Friday was a bit of a disaster, a bit of a defeat, a low point and a sad point, but thank God for Easter Day, the day of victory, the day of power, the day of resurrection, the day of vindication, we can put Good Friday behind us.

for in the end you end up with a false dichotomy and a wrong theology. For 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.

[ 14 : 27 ] The message of the cross is the power of God, not the message of the resurrection being the power of God and the message of the cross being something else. It is the cross that's powerful, it's the death that's powerful.

The resurrection declares the power of the cross and shows that God puts his stamp of approval on the cross. The resurrection is not victory at the expense of the cross or to overturn that defeat, not at all.

It is the cross that is the power for salvation. And wise people of our world hate the cross of Christ. You see, it pulls the rug out from under their feet. It tells them they've got nothing to contribute to salvation. All their cleverness and all their brute force comes to naught.

Not a scurric of merit is found in their ingenuity and in their power. Not a bit. Kerry Packer, I'm sure, now knows that.

[ 15 : 36 ] If he didn't before he died. You see, the wisdom of the world is destroyed by the cross of Christ. I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning.

I will thwart. So God said 750 years before Jesus died, fulfilling that threat on Calvary's cross. Jesus, Paul says, where is the one who's wise?

He's throwing out a taunt. Where is the one who's wise? Come on, who's going to own up now in the face of the cross of Christ? Where's the scribe? Where's the debater of this age?

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? Come on, who's going to challenge God in the wisdom stakes? no one in the end can stand before the wisdom of God.

And the worldly wise of our era, like any other era, hate the cross of Christ because it demolishes all their pretensions.

[ 16 : 42 ] Stephen Hawking, one of the wisest people people think these days, that great Cambridge philosopher, writer, scientist, argues that at the end of, I think it's his book, about the history of the universe or whatever it is, that then we'll know the mind of God.

What a fool. You cannot know the mind of God by your cleverness, by scientific theory or by your wisdom. 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. Human wisdom will not find God's mind.

God tells us his mind. In the proclamation of his word, the scriptures. Even in the church, and to this day, it seems to me, there is an idolatry of worldly wisdom that misleads, and sadly probably leads people to hell.

The Bible is ridiculed as primitive, and the cross of Christ as just primitive barbarism, which we have surely grown out of and moved on from, if we're the 21st century cross.

[18:04] I've read and heard those sorts of arguments. It's the sort of thing that was said by the primate of our country, that is the chief Anglican, who retired a year or two ago.

I had the opportunity of giving a Bible study at General Synod two years ago, and without quoting him but making it clear to those who had ears to hear, I refuted such nonsense with him six feet away from me.

Evangelicals are mocked in our church as naive simpletons because we believe the Bible, and because we have at the heart the cross of Christ. So often the language is of moving on and moving deeper, exploring further the mysteries of God and so on.

It's poppycock and nonsense, but it's the idolatry that so much of the church is running after. In Paul's day, Jews in particular wanted signs of power.

It comes out of their Old Testament experience of God with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, defeating Pharaoh in Egypt and so on. In particular, in Paul's day, the Greeks tended to value philosophy and ideas, rhetoric and thinking, grandiose speeches and so on.

[19:24] For Jews demand signs, and Greeks desire wisdom. Yet the gospel is Christ crucified, a dead Messiah.

And those who are perishing, those who are unbelievers, find that morally and intellectually outrageous, scandalous, and foolish.

But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles.

Gentiles. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

You see, in what seems to be utter foolishness, God powerfully saves us from our sins. In what is apparent weakness, God conquers sin, death, and evil.

[20:31] We are unable to save ourselves by our own power. We are unable to save ourselves by our own wisdom. But God saves with the gospel gambit of a king's sacrifice, taking on himself the sins of the world, so that his holiness is not compromised and his mercy is not thwarted.

Yes, it is, apparently, a weak and foolish way of salvation. But the point is, it works.

It saves. The death of Jesus for all its scandal and disgrace, apparent weakness and foolishness, saves us from our sins.

and nothing else can and nothing else does. It works. It is, in fact, wise and powerful.

If God's method of salvation is weak and foolish, then so are those who are saved, weak and foolish.

[21:47] That's the argument as Paul goes on at the end of chapter 1. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise by human standards and not many were powerful.

Not many of you were of noble birth. Some, but not many. 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.

Look around. We're ordinary people. Not many of us are strong. Not many of us are wise. Not many of us are noble birth.

There's little about us in some ways that will captivate the world out there and make the world think, gosh, look at those great people who go to church. There's something powerful and wise there.

[22:49] We must go. Not at all. Mostly, we're ordinary folk. But God chooses ordinary folk. He chooses weak people.

He chooses unwise people in the world's eyes. Sometimes the church forgets that. Sometimes we forget that and we actually get frustrated by the church because it's full of ordinary folk and weak folk and stupid folk and powerless folk.

But it's the way God works. His method of salvation looks to the world to be weak and foolish but it's powerful. And the church members, you and me, we're actually weak and unwise people in many

respects, mostly.

That's how God works. It's so that our only boast is in God. It's so that we can't boast in ourselves. We can't say, well, look at us. We're all very wise people.

Aren't we so wise? Hasn't God been clever to choose us? We can't boast like that. We can't say, we're of the top echelons of our society and so our society will look up to us.

[ 23 : 59 ] Isn't God clever to have chosen us? No, we can't boast like that. We can't boast in ourself at all. But we can boast in the Lord. You see, the method of salvation matches those who are saved so that all the glory goes to God and none to us as it ought to be.

It's encouraging, though, to think that. It's encouraging to think that we're ordinary folk, that we're weak and helpless by and large. It encourages us not to think too highly of ourselves.

It encourages us not to fear failure. God knows us after all better than we do and he chose us. It encourages us not to despise failure. It encourages us to be patient with other Christians and patient with the church that so often fails.

It encourages us to boast in the Lord and not in ourselves. See what a great level of the gospel is. It brings us all to our knees before the cross.

We have nothing to contribute. Our wisdom is nothing. Our power is nothing. Our noble birth, if there are any, is nothing. It's a great leveler and it's why the world hates it.

[ 25 : 18 ] You see, the gospel of the cross strips away our pride, our pretension, our self-importance, our self-sufficiency, our self-reliance. The gospel of the cross demolishes any grounds we might think we have of boasting.

The gospel of the cross destroys our claims on both wisdom and power. No wonder people scorn it. What a scandal. But it's how God works.

And if salvation's method is weak and foolish, and if those who are saved are weak and foolish, so do the preachers. And that's Paul's final bit of this consistent argument.

He says, When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom, that is, following the great and exalted Greek rhetoric-type style that the Greeks so valued.

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. 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 not rest on human wisdom, but on the power of God.

[ 26 : 34 ] You see, a weak salvation, weak people who are saved and weak preachers so that again the glory goes to God. Again, there's no danger of people relying on the preacher, but they rely on God.

One of the great preachers of the last 300 years was Jonathan Edwards, perhaps one of the greatest American philosophers and theologians as well as preachers. Thoroughly short-sighted, probably worse than I.

Somehow he didn't have glasses that quite worked as well as mine. And so he would preach with his notes like that, that's how I have to put them so I can read them without my glasses, to thousands of people in the open air and hundreds and hundreds were converted.

The world would laugh at that. The world would say you'd never get someone like that in a pulpit. Keep him in the pew. Isn't it great how God works? There's nothing wrong, of course, with good preaching.

There's nothing wrong with well-crafted sermons. I hope there's nothing wrong with the hours that I slog over them. But in Paul's day there was great delight in rhetoric, in words, in flow and rhythm and so on.

[ 27 : 45 ] Paul says it's the content that matters and the content is Christ crucified. Scandalous content but powerful to save.

There's an abundance of material around in all the Christian bookshops and magazines and journals and internets and so on about growing healthy churches. Often, not always, but often, I think they miss the mark.

Often it's little better than some sociological idea about what sorts of people will attract what sorts of other people or what sorts of programs that you should have. Now, some of that's good and useful but it's a waste of time if the heart and the center is not right.

It's the message of the cross alone that is powerful to save. And all the sociology and all the programs and all the methods and all the beautiful buildings and all the glamorous music and all the nice suppers in the world will not save if the message at the heart is not Christ crucified.

That's a great temptation for preachers to drift away from it, let me tell you. There's a great temptation for preachers to please people, to pander, to itching ears, to say, you can contribute something, you're worthwhile, you're great, God would love to have you on board because of all the gifts and skills that you've got.

[ 29 : 13 ] People like to hear that. There's great temptation to dilute the gospel, to make it more palatable to the world out there. But I resolve to keep preaching Christ crucified.

Scandal, foolish, nonsense to the world. I calculated yesterday that in 10 years here as vicar I've written 380 new sermons and I've actually stood in effect in the pulpit I think on Sunday here if I counted rightly 972 times.

That's a lot of hours of preaching you've had to listen to. It's a lot more hours that I've prepared let me tell you. And that excludes weddings and funerals. And there are certainly times aplenty when I think oh what am I bothering for?

Why don't I just rehash something else? Why don't I give up on this? Why am I spending my Saturday night slogging away in my study trying to get the words right, the flow right and understand the passage better? There are plenty of times when I've been discouraged by my own weakness and discouraged sometimes by thinking nobody ever listens anyway.

And there are plenty of times when I thought why don't I find a better paid job? Go back to being an actuary with sensible hours and far less demands and you don't have to worry about people all the time.

[ 30 : 42 ] But let me tell you I resolve again to keep preaching Christ crucified. What I remind myself is this it is only the message of the cross that makes an eternal difference for a person.

And that's why usually I slog it out on a Saturday preparing a sermon because only the message of the cross makes an eternal difference and is powerful to save.

It's why for example on both Wednesday and Thursday I went to two different nursing homes to visit people whom I never met but had been asked to go and speak with who are dying.

Why would I spend time sitting there with an old frail person? Why wasn't I out doing something more glamorous? Because it's only the message of the cross that is powerful to save.

It's why I visited a man with dementia on Thursday who no longer knows who I am. Because it's the message of the cross that is powerful to save.

[ 31 : 56 ] It's why though tired on Good Friday night and in pouring rain I went out to our Mandarin youth camp to speak to them when I could have been at home in the warmth reading a nice book.

Why? Because it's the message of the cross that is powerful to save. when I look back over what I consider to be oh such a brief decade the highlights are the gospel ones.

Yeah there are lots of highlights that I could rattle off I guess a new building 150th celebration great food and concerts and church camps good staff and fun times and so on but in the end actually they're not the highlights in my mind.

The highlights are when the gospel of Christ crucified saves people. So the highlights are people becoming Christians like Monica and Tony and Michelle and Evan and Matthew and Samin and Joe and Patrick Jennifer Freeman Anthony Peter Michael string of others let me say the highlights are seeing young people who are little kids now teenagers or teenagers now adults who are going on in Christian faith trusting Christ crucified people like Martin and Emma and Ryan and John and Anushka and Janine and others many others the highlights are seeing oddly perhaps people dying trusting Christ crucified people like Rob and Jenny and Sue and Bill and Connie and Nairie and Mildred and many others the highlights are seeing people continuing in Christian faith with lives that are far from easy suffering grief prolonged illness all sorts of pain and difficulty people like Flory and Judy and Peter and Julie and Margo and Warwick and Olive and Miriam and Jenny and many many others keeping trusting Christ crucified the power to save the highlights are seeing people prepared to give their whole lives in the service of the gospel to go from well paid positions and jobs to serve the gospel of Christ crucified because it's the power to save people like Andrew and Helen with Jacqueline and Danny and Tim and Steve and others the other highlights are people who keep praying for and invite their family and friends to hear the gospel because they trust the gospel of Christ crucified is the power to save the world thinks this is a waste of time the world thinks this is absolute nonsense foolishness the world thinks

[ 35 : 10 ] I must be an idiot to give up being an actuary to become the minister of a church a crucified messiah what a waste of your life but God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength the message of the cross is both power and wisdom to save for eternity there's nothing else that does that and at the heart of heaven on the universe's most powerful throne there is a slain lamb hallelujah■■ there is a story we're talking about this prophecy about the slavery the dream the life the bacon o the parrot and money about food and everything to