

Bethel

Pulpit

The Preaching of the Cross

Sermon Number 444

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 19th June, 2022**

Text: *“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1. 18).*

The preaching of the cross, the preaching of Christ and Him crucified – when did it begin? Not with the Apostle Paul. I believe it began in the Garden of Eden when man had sorely fallen, when he was there in his lost, ruined condition, and Almighty God first preached to him deliverance. The first promise: that the Lord would bruise the serpent's head, O but the serpent should bruise His heel. That was in the crucifixion, when the Saviour's heel was so dreadfully bruised, even unto death. And then all this with that revelation, there was the shedding of blood, there was the coat of skins, and they were clothed. There was life instead of death. I solemnly believe that was the first preaching of the cross by Almighty God Himself. O but just a little, faint gleam of light shining in this dark world.

But then, of course, right down the ages, before the Saviour's coming, perhaps not so much by word, but by types and shadows given in love, pointing forward to the cross of Christ. We think of the wonderful case of Abraham and Isaac, the lamb caught in the thicket, the lamb slain, its blood shed; the lamb slain, Isaac set free, all pointing forward to the substitutionary death, the atoning death of our Lord Jesus on the cross.

Then there were the daily sacrifices, and especially there was the solemn Passover night. O what a sweet foretaste of the cross of Christ there – salvation by blood, deliverance by blood, by blood alone, no other way, safety beneath the blood, sheltering beneath the blood. “When I see the blood, I will pass over you.” And then surely on the great day of atonement, Aaron and his successors there openly preached the cross of Christ in types, in those two goats, one slain, its body burned without the camp; the other, all the sins of Israel laid ceremonially on its head, led out into the wilderness to be seen no more. All these little things were foretastes of the cross of Christ.

Of course, the great question is this, and none of us can really answer it: how much did those godly Israelites know of the cross of Christ? I think really we would be very surprised if we knew the answer! Those old patriarchs knew a lot. Old Jacob saw God face to face and his life was preserved (Genesis 32. 30). What glimpses did David have!

But then all the glory of it came when Isaiah was raised up to preach the cross of Christ. “Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.... He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” The cross of Christ was never preached more clearly, even by the Apostle Paul, than by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 53.

How literally, word for word, Isaiah’s prophecy of the cross of Christ was preached by Philip to the eunuch in the dessert. “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened He not His mouth.” That is the cross of Christ. Well, says the eunuch, “Of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?” Now this is it: “Then Philip ... began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.”

Here in this chapter we have the preaching of the cross of Christ in all its fulness as the apostle opens up this beautiful gospel epistle, and he takes his stand on one ground and one ground alone: “I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” That is the glory of the gospel and it has been made a blessing ever since, a blessing in its absolute suitability to meet the needs of a longing sinner. May it be so here more and more at Bethel, and may it be so right down to the end of time.

“The preaching of the cross.” Some things are important; some are more important than others. This, beloved friends, is *vital*. “The cross of Christ.” Well, that hymn we sang just now comes right to the point:

“To know my Jesus crucified,
By far excels all things beside.”

This is the one thing needful. This is the one thing that really matters, to be led by the Spirit of God, feeling in measure our lost and ruined condition through sin, and what is it? In John Kent's beautiful language:

“Then to the cross of Christ repair,
And find salvation only there.”

“The cross of Christ.” O but this vast subject! Who is fitted to speak about it! Surely,

“Living tongues are dumb at best;
We must die to speak of Christ.”

But I do believe that this is the one subject, if I am a stranger to all others, the one subject into which the Holy Spirit so sacredly, solemnly, blessedly led me in my early days, when I was still a student at university, as if I was week after week dwelling near the cross of Christ.

Well, what is the cross of Christ? It is *the place where Jesus died*. That is the truth in all its beautiful simplicity, and though there is such a great depth in the gospel, there is a beautiful simplicity in it. The children's hymn:

“And so He died, and this is why
He came to be a Man and die:
The Bible says He came from heaven,
That we might have our sins forgiven.”

What could be more simple than that, but what could be more beautiful! But there is a wonderful depth there that coucheth beneath, that Jesus died on that cruel cross that was there erected by wicked hands to crucify Him. But we must think who He was. This was the eternal Son of God veiling His greatness and glory, now a real Man, having taken our nature into union with His divine Person without any taint of sin, that He might “take the dying traitor's place and suffer in his stead.” He instead of me; Christ instead of the sinner.

We think of what the cross really meant. No wonder the skies were darkened and the earth itself trembled. This was all nature's Creator who was now being put to death by wicked hands. The mystery of it, but O the glory of it! If there had never been the cross of Christ, the whole lot of us

in this chapel would have been lost; we should have perished to all eternity. O but there *was* the cross of Christ. It was appointed by the Father. He gave His own beloved Son for this purpose, that He might die on the cross. O but the willingness of the dear Lord Jesus and the vastness of His love, love to such unworthy sinners, that “having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end.”

“The cross of Christ.”

“O the sweet wonders of that cross,
Where God the Saviour loved and died!”

O the bitter agonies that He suffered in body and mind and soul. We can never really comprehend them all, but a little sight of them will soften your heart. It will humble you, especially if you can say, “All this was done for me.” And there will be a few tears inwardly, if not outwardly, as you are led by faith, by the Holy Spirit to the cross. O the crown of thorns, the purple robe, the wounds in the dear Saviour’s hands and feet and side, and those dreadful sufferings of His soul! “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”

Now there is all this – there is much more – in the cross of Christ. His death was life for all His people. The great atonement, the blood that He shed, washes away all their sins. May you younger ones especially be sweetly led in your thoughts, your meditations, your prayers, to the cross of Christ, and to have a glimpse by faith of the dear Saviour in His sufferings and death, and may you have that sweet assurance, hear that voice from heaven: “All this was done for you,” and your lives will never be the same again.

“The cross of Christ.” O what a subject! How I wish I could really speak of it to you – the wonders of the cross, the awfulness of the cross, the glories of the cross. This has been the glory of the church of God ever since. “Saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation.” And sinners, unworthy sinners, one generation has been raised up after another to preach the cross of Christ. “They shall come, and shall declare ... unto a people that shall be born, that He hath done this.”

“Hark! the voice of love and mercy
Sounds aloud from Calvary!”

“The preaching of the cross.” What did the cross of Christ mean to the dying thief, seemingly dying without hope, that accursed malefactor, condemned for his own sin? “Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.” He knew what the cross of Christ meant. “Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with Me in paradise.”

“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.” So we have this very solemn truth, that the preaching of the cross will always separate – always. It will divide. You do not need to preach all the thunders of Sinai to separate the people of God from the world. If you are led by the Spirit to preach the cross of Christ, it will always separate. We have the two peoples described here: the saved and those that perish; those that are saved and those that perish – the clear distinction. And yet we realise that by nature all of us were amongst those who seemed going eternally to perish, and we deserve to perish, and yet that wonderful word: “Whosoever believeth in Him” – believeth on the crucified Saviour – “whosoever believeth in Him should *not perish*, but have everlasting life.” O but that solemn difference and that solemn, everlasting separation between those that perish and those that are saved! May you and I be found on God’s right hand at last, through mercy alone, through the cross of Christ alone.

“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.” O surely, surely you are not going to live and die in Bethel Chapel, and in your heart of hearts the preaching of the cross is foolishness to you! Do not forget what the city of Corinth was. Some of the greatest intellects and brains that there have ever been were found amongst the Greeks at this time, and some of them according to the flesh were good men. I do not know whether you children still have to study them at school – Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and others. Some of them were even striving to find out about God. But these Corinthians were what today we would call intellectuals, and they were proud of it; they knew it. When they heard the Apostle Paul stand up and say there was a man named Jesus, and He was put to death by the Romans and Jews, and compelled to die on the cross, and to hear that this was the only thing in life that really matters, this was the only answer to all their problems and all their philosophies, and all their wisdom was nothing compared with this – well, they counted it just to be complete foolishness. They could not understand it. But we read of a few in the Acts of the

Apostles, and their hearts and minds were enlightened. It was not foolishness then.

But, “The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.” That is the sad state of religion in England today. You do not have generally the preaching of the cross. Where there is any sensible preaching, it is more on, we need to do good, and morality, ethics, so on. These things are good in their place, but we cannot be saved by trying to do our best. We need a Saviour who lived and died and rose again. But where there is a minister who ventures and he begins to speak on the cross of Christ, there are many in our sinful world, and it is just foolishness to them.

“The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.” But there are two different ways. There are some people who just mock at it, just reject it. “Foolishness.” But then there are some who just cannot understand it. I have often told you the famous story of the great William Pitt (1759-1806). Was he our greatest prime minister? He was certainly our youngest prime minister. If ever there was a brilliant man as prime minister, it was Pitt. His friend Wilberforce prayed for him, and in the end he begged him to go and hear the gospel. It was a wonderful, simple sermon on the cross of Christ, and Wilberforce could not wait to get out to ask his friend how he got on. Pitt said, “Well, my dear friend, for your sake I listened with all my brain, all my intellect, but I just couldn’t understand it. It meant nothing to me.” O may the preaching of the cross never be foolishness to us, because if we live and die with the preaching of the cross foolishness, then the Word of God tells us that we shall perish, and that is perish eternally.

“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.” Some perish; by nature all deserve to perish; but through grace there are some who are saved. And what do they say?

“Why was I made to hear Thy voice,
And enter while there’s room;
When thousands make a wretched choice,
And rather starve than come?”

“Us which are saved.” It is such a short, simple statement, but there is everlasting life in it; there is heaven in it. May you and I be in it through

grace. “Us which are saved.” “Saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation.” Grace has made the difference.

“For the preaching of the cross it to them that perish foolishness; *but* unto us which are saved it is the power of God.” So this great question at the end: *In what way is the preaching of the cross the power of God*, the power of God to those who are saved? Very simply I would like to give you three answers.

First of all, the preaching of the cross is the power of God because there was a divine, almighty power in the cross of Christ when the Saviour died. He was crucified in weakness, but O the *power* of His death – that *power* to wash away sin, that *power* to save to the uttermost, that *power* in the atonement, that *power* in the precious blood. That is the *power* of the cross of Christ. In one word, it is that simple, well-known hymn:

“Dear dying Lamb! Thy precious blood
Shall never lose its power,
Till all the ransomed church of God
Be saved, to sin no more.”

So what is the power of the cross of Christ? And the second answer: though it is two thousand years since the Lord Jesus died on the cross, yet there is still a power in it that still works in the hearts of sinners. That is why in the Revelation when John had a glimpse of Him, he saw the Lamb appearing *just as if He had been slain*. It is still the same today: that precious blood still has the same power. It has *this* power. There is a divine appointment concerning every sinner for whom He died, through the cross of Christ, that one by one down the ages, that divine power of the cross shall be put forth in that sinner’s heart and life, completely to change him, to alter the way he was going, to deliver him, to save him. For that word must ever stand of the cross of Christ and the dear Saviour who died there: “He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied.” O that work, the effect of the cross of Christ, is going on as one by one – one here, one there, are brought under the power and the effect of it, delivered from sin, brought into the kingdom of God.

But then a third answer to that important question, What is the power of the cross of Christ? It is a power not only to save, but to sanctify. What does that mean? When a sinner is saved by the cross of Christ, he is

forgiven – his sins are washed away – but there will be a difference in his life. His life will be for ever changed. The cross of Christ will have a strong, vital influence. Did Christ suffer? Was it my sins that laid Him there, that nailed Him there? Then may I henceforth live to the honour and glory of His name. May the world mean nothing to us. How could I go on in those sins which crucified my Lord and God? In a word it is this: “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the sanctifying, gracious effect: “By whom” – by Christ, by His cross – “by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.”

Well, what a subject, what a glorious subject, what a vital subject! “The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.” O how solemn, how dreadful! But O how blessed: “But unto us which are saved it is the power of God.”

* * *

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See! from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

I. Watts