

A FOOL'S ERRAND (1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

Cathedral, 4 March 2018

At the back of your order of service today there is an image of the Crucified Christ entitled “Here hangs a man discarded”.

The phrase is from one of many contemporary hymns by English writer Brian Wren:

*Here hangs a man discarded,
a scarecrow hoisted high,
a nonsense pointing nowhere
to all who hurry by.
Can such a clown of sorrows
still bring a useful word
when faith and love seem phantoms
and every hope absurd?*

The teaching of Paul when he wrote to the Corinthians was very clear: *We are preaching a Messiah who was nailed to a cross.*

To the Jews this is an obstacle they cannot get over and this is because for them the Messiah must be a conquering national deliverer who will defeat the Romans and restore their identity as God's chosen. *To the Greeks* (or Gentiles) *this is madness*. It is madness because Greek philosophical wisdom was greatly prized by the Corinthians and was a kind of badge of cleverness.

But Paul is determined that he will know nothing but Christ and him crucified. Think about this for a moment. For Paul, the Crucified Christ is his fundamental point of reference, his signpost if you will.

I wonder if any of you were taught, when you were younger, that the Roman Catholics were idolatrous because they had a dead Jesus on the cross in their churches, but we (Protestants) have empty crosses because Christ is risen. How does this argument stand in light of Paul's conviction?

Some images of the crucifixion can draw us into contemplation if we will pause and make time for this.

*Yet here is help and comfort
for lives by comfort bound,*

*when drums of dazzling progress
give strangely hollow sound:
Life, emptied of all meaning,
drained out in bleak distress,
can share in broken silence
our deepest emptiness;*

...in broken silence, our deepest emptiness

When walked in prayer, the Stations of the Cross invite us to stand in the uncomfortable spaces: with those abused, terrorised, landless, exploited, discriminated against, cast out of society. We are reminded that they are human too, and that God's love is for them.

But of course it is possible to jump over the Cross. Really, it would be much nicer, as some do, to wave palm branches and shout Hosanna and not reappear until Easter morning with its cry of Alleluia! He is risen!

But surely this becomes as disappointingly empty as an Easter Egg with no contents, merely a happy spectacle.

I said recently that Ash Wednesday and the days that follow provide us with the opportunity to gaze upon our own mortality and not quickly to look away. Just so we are invited to gaze upon the Crucified One as the foolishness of God and not hurry away.

God's foolish ones are those who, like Jesus, take no thought for their reputation, for the need to be right, to have the best philosophy, or even to save their own skin.

The trial and humiliation of Jesus before his execution was, and make no mistake about this, a piece of theatrical propaganda. *This is what will happen to you as well, if you dare to challenge the Roman status quo.*

Some of the people who risk all for the message of God's vulnerable love in Christ are well-known, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer who stood for the Gospel against the Nazis, and was executed just prior to the end of the war.

But I came across another, not previously known to me this week. I will not need to point out to you the contemporary echoes in this story.

Sophie Scholl was a German college student and political activist who bravely fought the Nazi propaganda machine.

She was born in 1921 to a Lutheran family. Her father Robert was a city mayor. As the Nazi party rose to power in the 1930's, Robert Scholl became a fierce critic of the oppressive regime.

Exceptionally bright and curious, Sophie was an excellent student and a talented artist. High school was difficult for her, however, because the curriculum was increasingly poisoned with Nazi indoctrination.

Sophie attended the University of Munich with her brother Hans. In Munich, the siblings reveled in the sophistication of big-city life. They met artists and intellectuals, but nobody knew what to do about the darkness overtaking their country.

A devoted Christian, Sophie was an admirer of Cardinal Newman, who preached a "theology of conscience" which advocated resisting authority when necessary in service of a greater good.

Determined to do what she could to save her country from the evils of Nazism, Sophie formed a resistance group with Hans and a few other friends from university. They named their group the White Rose.

Sophie knew that Hitler's most powerful weapon was the pro-Nazi propaganda that saturated the country. She decided to combat the newspapers' hateful lies with truthful publications delivered directly to ordinary Germans.

The White Rose wrote and printed pamphlets denouncing the Nazi regime and warning Germans that Hitler was destroying their country. Despite the extreme danger, they handed out thousands of pamphlets in Munich, and later in other parts of Germany.

The pamphlets contained sharp warnings such as: "Hitler is leading the German people into the abyss. Are we to be forever a nation which is hated and rejected by all mankind?"

On February 18, 1943, Sophie and Hans were distributing their sixth leaflet when they were arrested by the Gestapo. Sophie was interrogated so cruelly that her leg was broken.

Brought before a judge, Sophie was not allowed a lawyer. Her sole defense consisted of the following statement:

"Somebody after all, had to make a start. What we wrote and said is also believed by many others.

They just don't dare express themselves as we did."

Sophie, Hans and fellow White Rose activist Christoph Probst were found guilty of high treason on February 22, 1943. They were sentenced to death and executed that same day.

Witnesses later described Sophie's remarkable serenity and courage walking to the guillotine. She declared: "Such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go, but what does my death matter, if through us, thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?"

Hans' last words were "Long live freedom."

A copy of the White Rose's sixth and final leaflet was smuggled out of Germany and given to Allied forces. In mid-1943, the Allies dropped millions of copies over Germany. They renamed it "Manifesto of the Students of Munich."

Today, over 200 schools in Germany are named for the Scholls.

Out of her faith and inspiration Sophie and Hans chose to be God's fools: *What we wrote and said is also believed by many others. They just don't dare express themselves as we did.*"

Brian Wren concludes his hymn thus:

*and love that freely entered
the pit of life's despair,
can name our hidden darkness
and suffer with us there.
Christ, in our darkness risen,
help all who long for light
to hold the hand of promise,
and walk into the night.*

We will observe a time of silence for contemplation:

What role does the man, discarded mean for me?

How do I stay with the Crucified, as he asked his followers to do?

How will I journey from Palm Sunday to Easter morning this year?

- Ian Render

