

## 1 Corinthians 2: 1-10

We meet the apostle Paul this morning, not as a hero, not as a world-champion in speech or philosophy, but as a man that shows his weaknesses and fears. He was trembling when he had to speak in public. That is not the Paul I picture. In my mind, Paul is fierce, bold, hardworking, a clever and good communicator. But here he says: I was with you in much trembling! Later he will write that he not only fell short of the standards of Greek rhetoric (2 Cor. 10:10), but that his personal appearance was unattractive and that God was using Paul's human weakness to show forth His own glory (2 Cor. 12: 7-10).

It's helpful to know, as a preacher, that even the great Paul was nervous! I am not the only one! And it helps also to know that I do not have to impress my public. Trying to impress your public is a temptation for anyone who stands before a public and preaches, teaches, or plays an instrument. Paul says here: do not use lofty speech or wisdom. It won't work. I don't try to be wise. I just preach Christ and Him crucified! The reason I do that is (verse 5) so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

That seems to be the opposite of what we need, as human beings, having a leader who dies a terrible death. Why would we want to preach that? We need a different Christ, more to our image and likeness. The main actors of the media-event the Passion were announced this past week, and Tim Akkerman plays the role of Jesus. He himself is not a believer, and remarks that faith plays a minor role in the story of Jesus. Akkerman thinks that Jesus was the kind of person that wanted to bring change, and sees a lot of similarities between Jesus and himself. 'I have the idea that many people sympathized with Jesus, because He accepted all human beings just as they are.' 'That is why Jesus got so many followers and that is exactly what I want. I Just want to do what feels good and would like to convince others to do the same.' 'My own way becomes clearer and clearer to me.'

Akkerman's view of Jesus is shaped by the wisdom of our world and has little to do with the reality of Jesus and his crucifixion. It's a very sympathetic Jesus who followed his own heart and encouraged others to do the same! So why preach a crucified Lord, why not adapt Him to our worldview and philosophy?

When we look at the passage in 1 Corinthians 2, we see that Paul makes use of opposites: the lofty speech of the Greeks is contrasted by Paul's proclamation of Jesus, his fear by the demonstration of the power of the Spirit, the wisdom of this age by the wisdom of God, and so on. Our passage actually says that our own worldview and wisdom do not suffice. We need the wisdom of God, we need the power of the Spirit, we need Christ the crucified and have our faith resting in the power of God, instead of in the wisdom of men.

What Paul is writing here goes against everything the Greeks believed in. Philosophers had to bring their message across in the best possible way. The acceptance of the message depend on the erudition of the speaker. The speech had to be crisp, accurate, fast, filled with knowledge and rented by heart. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, one of the largest cities in the Roman world and one of the most corrupt. The city was a strategic commercial center and sought to provide a wide variety of pleasures to international visitors. Philosophy was part of that entertainment industry of Corinth. The church in Corinth had to deal with the surrounding reality and reacted in two ways. One part thought that almost everything was acceptable, and another part of the church argued that a measure of isolation was essential to be able to follow the Lord and preserve holiness.

The opposite tendencies grew out of control in Corinth and endangered the future of the congregation. Paul did everything he could to guide the whole of the congregation back to the essence of our faith: Jesus and Him crucified.

Paul and the congregation in Corinth were constantly in touch: He visited Corinth three times, we know about five letters (four from Paul to Corinth and one from the church to Paul) and of multiple delegations back and forth (Corinth sent Chloe, Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus a few times, while Paul sent Timothy and Titus multiple times). So, Paul did what he could to help the church of Corinth and all the effort he put into it is summarized in our reading, that he decided to know nothing among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Jesus Christ crucified is totally in line with the teaching of Jesus. You read in the Sermon on the Mount that talked about how blessed the poor, those who mourn, the hungry and even the persecuted are. It is the world upside-down. The teaching of Jesus and the way He lived and died are opposite to our own thinking, opposite to the wisdom of the world.

Why does it have to be this way? Why is the weakness connected with the power of God and with the work and demonstration of the Spirit? The gospel is so counter-intuitive. I can understand Akkermans (the Jesus-figure in the Passion), when he describes the work of Jesus along the lines of his own thinking. But the Bible says the opposite: the wisdom of God cannot be understood by our worldly standards. God chose what is low and despised in the world, so that no human can boast.

Paul calls this wisdom a mystery. Nobody understood it, not even the rulers of this age, otherwise they wouldn't have crucified Jesus. It is a mystery that no heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him. Does Paul help us and give hints to understand what this mystery is?

Yes, he surely does. He talks in verse 7 about a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. That secret is now revealed, that secret is prepared for us, who love Him. So it is about Jesus. It is different from the crucifixion itself, it seems. Because he says: none of the rulers of this age understood this (plan), for if they had, they wouldn't have crucified Jesus. The plan must be more than the core of the gospel, the crucifixion. It seems that Paul hints at what the plan is, when he calls Jesus 'the Lord of glory.' That is a strange title for a person who is crucified. The crucifixion seems to be misery and defeat instead of glory.

It does seem so. But not in the mind of God. The crucifixion is about Jesus who conquers! He is the Lord of glory! He wasn't losing on the cross, He was conquering gloriously. That is why Paul calls him 'the Lord of glory.' That is, in my opinion, the mystery which is easy to be misunderstood. Jesus seemed to lose, but He was not. He was winning. He was defeating sin and Satan, and death, because He is crucified there for all mankind. And the only reason why he conquered on the cross, is that Jesus is God in the flesh. He is the Lord of glory. He is the only sinless person that ever lived, God became man. The only innocent person that ever lived on this earth. And that is how Jesus took our sins upon himself. He became the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. And that is how we ourselves, by faith, are made alive in Christ. His death becomes ours. He wasn't defeated, but conquered death and Satan on the cross for us. And we are made new in Jesus by faith. Just like Paul and Peter and Mary, and Rhode and all the New Testament Christians. And that is why this wisdom (in verse 7) is decreed before all ages for our glory!! We are victorious with Jesus. We seem small, and weak, and trembling, but we are more than conquerors in Him who loved us. That is the good news, and that is why our faith does not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God!

Do I feel all this? The attributes with which Paul describes us? Glory, demonstration of the Spirit, Power, Wisdom of God? No, I don't. And you don't. And Paul didn't. So our faith does not rest in what we feel. It is counter-intuitive all the way long. Our faith rests in Christ who conquered. That is, it rests in the power of God. And if so, then our weakness becomes a blessing. Just like Paul says later: When I am weak, I am strong. So let us be weak in ourselves, but strong in Christ Jesus. Paul encourages us to let our faith rest, not in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. And that power is working in us. It is the power of Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected. Jesus is sitting on the throne, and that is the power we are linked to. The holy Spirit is poured out, so it is that same power that made Jesus conquer on the cross and rise from the dead, that is now working in us. If we rely fully on the power of God, we will be strong in our weakest moments. And our faith will call the attention of others.

Our weakness as our biggest strength is rendered brilliantly in a letter from the time of the early church, written to Diogenes. Someone from outside the church saw that our biggest strength and testimony, is being weak in ourselves, but strong in the power of God. It reads:

*Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by the curiosity of men. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human doctrine. With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.*

*And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives.*

*They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. Christians love all men, but all men persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonor, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then they, rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life. They are attacked by the Jews as aliens, they are persecuted by the Greeks, yet no one can explain the reason for this hatred.*

*To speak in general terms, we may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body.*

That is the kind of church we want to be. We want to function like that, and this passage calls us to such a counter-intuitive life. But this counter-intuitiveness starts with Jesus. With Him crucified. We will have to surrender all to this Jesus, who died on the cross and conquered sin, Satan and death on the cross. We will have our faith to rest on the power of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. So, brothers and sisters: let us be weak! Let us do what Paul encourages us to, and rest in the Power of God, in Jesus Christ who conquered. He is our Lord of glory and it is an honor to follow Him who became poor to make us rich.

Amen.