

A church centred on the cross

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[0 : 00] Good morning everyone. We're going to continue reading the full passage of what we just looked at. So it's 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 18 and we're going to read all the way to chapter 2 and verse 5.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent, I will frustrate.

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world, through its wisdom, did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

Jews demand science and Greeks look for wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called.

[1 : 24] Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were influential. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise.

God chose the weak things of this world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world, and the despised things and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us the wisdom of God, that is our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.

Therefore, as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. Chapter 2. And so it was for me, brothers and sisters, when I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom, as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you, except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness, with great fear and trembling.

[2 : 34] My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

Amen. Well, over the next few weeks, we're going to spend some time thinking about seven different things, which are really important for us as a church.

Seven marks, if you like, of what church life should be like. And the first one this week is about being cross-centered, and we're going to look at that passage together. So let me pray as we do that.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you have spoken through your word, the Bible, by your Spirit in our hearts as we listen. And we pray, please, this morning, that you might help us to understand what you've written, that we might listen carefully and thoughtfully, that you might be at work in us, not only as individuals, but also as a church family.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, on June the 22nd, which I think was the week before last, wasn't it?

[3 : 51] It marked 75 years since the docking of HMT Empire Windrush at the Tilbury Docks in Essex. And I think there's a picture of that. On that day, 492 passengers from the Caribbean disembarked to begin a new life in Britain, arriving here on the invitation of Britain, but finding that the country that had invited them did a very poor job of welcoming them.

So begins the famous story of the Windrush Generations. And there's been celebrations, haven't there, around Brent and Westminster I've seen, cycling around, as the significance of that story.

Now, I know that that story is personal to many of you. It has a profound impact, doesn't it, on the identity of many people and their experience of life.

Because here's the wider principle, okay? Here's the wider principle. It's stories of origins and history that understand how we shape our identity.

And I think if you can click onto the next slide. Stories of origins and history that shape how we understand who we are. In other words, I am who I am because of where I am from or because of what has happened to me or because of what has happened to those who are like me along the way.

[5 : 09] Now, I want to suggest to you, if that's true this morning because of Windrush or because of the history of where you're from or where I'm from or where you went to school or I went to school or what happened to my family before I came along, then I want to suggest to you, if you're a Christian this morning, then there is an even bigger story, a bigger history, if you like, that shapes all of our identities.

Not because those other things don't matter. They have their own significance, don't they? It's because this is more significant and even bigger than any of those histories. There is an action of God in history which transforms who I am, shapes all of my identity, something which forms the very center of the Christian identity, which is not based on what I've done, but what God has done.

And that's the cross. Click the next slide. So every week as a church, we are going to gather and retell the story of the cross, the story of God the Son in human flesh, giving his life in our place, bearing our sin that we might be forgiven, a story of a God who is rich in love, full of grace and truth, who moves towards the world that he has made, not as we might imagine in an awesome display of raw power, raw power, not moving towards his creation in dictating a book to a warrior in a cave, not even moving towards his creation in the silence of a meditating monk.

More miraculous than any of that, God moving towards the world that he's made by becoming one of us in the person of the Son. Jesus, fully God and fully man, coming not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

Now, I want to suggest to you this morning that so significant is that event and the history of it and the message of that event, that if you're a Christian this morning, before you are anything else, you're a child of the cross, forgiven, loved, accepted, secure, eternally alive, because in our place, condemned he stood, sealed our pardon with his blood.

[7 : 32] That's our shared history, isn't it? It's why when you come to 1 Corinthians, and look down at that if you've still got it open, when you come to 1 Corinthians, you find a church that is struggling and divided, and the Apostle Paul seeks to answer their struggles and their troubles, not so much by addressing them specifically.

It's ages before he really comes on to give any clear answers to the questions they're asking. Rather, he starts by retelling them the story of the cross and why his ministry is all about the cross.

And so for the time we've got together this morning, I want us to look carefully at what Paul says here and so that we can see what does it mean for us as a church to be cross-centered? What does it mean for us as a church to have this shared identity of being children of the cross of Christ?

What does it mean for us as a church family to be like that? And I want to start with three things that it does not mean and then give you three things that it does mean.

I know that's slightly counterintuitive, but it might keep your attention this morning. Okay, so three things that it does not mean. And there should be a slide for each of these, Neva, so here we go. Oh, she's chivvying me along.

[8 : 40] Being cross-centered does not mean being impressive. Just look down at the passage and look at verse 17, just before the section that Jen read for us. Paul is describing his own ministry among the Corinthian church and says in verse 17 that it wasn't with wisdom or eloquence.

Literally, it was not with word of wisdom. And that's because verse 18, the message of the cross, appears foolish and not impressive.

Now, it's not hard, is it, to see why Paul says this? Think about it. At the center of Paul's ministry, at the heart of the church in Corinth that he started, is the news of a man hanging naked and dying on a Roman cross.

A man facing the most shameful death, no. But a man who, Paul says, should now be worshipped as divine. There's a famous bit of ancient Roman graffiti, which is teasing a guy called Alex Aminos.

I don't know whether you've seen it. There's a slide of it. Alex was obviously a Christian, and the person who scratched the graffiti paints a picture of him in front of a cross where there's a man with the head of a donkey.

[9 : 52] And the graffiti says, which you might not be able to read the graffiti, it says, Alex Aminos worships his God, it says. It's teasing it, isn't it?

What a foolish thing. Imagine worshipping a guy dying on a cross. It's ancient kind of satire. But if we're honest, it's not just the first century Romans who thought the cross was stupid.

It's the same today. Imagine tomorrow morning, you're in a conversation with a colleague or a neighbor, and they ask you that sort of unlikely question.

I'm trying to think about identity and what it means to be me. They're never going to ask that, are they? But you just imagine that they do. And you say to them, I'm so pleased you asked that question. We were talking about that very thing at church yesterday.

My identity is all about a guy who hung dead on a Roman cross. What are they going to say? They're going to think you're crazy, aren't they?

[10 : 49] I mean, if you say, oh, no, actually for me, it's all about living by Jesus values. Well, they might recognize that, might they? They say, oh, yes, yeah, do to others as you would have them do to you. I think that's a great thing for your identity to be in, a great thing for you to live by.

But as soon as you say, no, no, my identity is in the blood and the gore of the cross, that's a bit weird, isn't it? Very impressive. And here's the rub then for us as a church.

We can either be, as a church, we can either be impressive, or we can be cross-centered. It can't be both. It can't be both. We can either choose to gather and tell the story of all of our achievements, what we've done, how well things are working out for us, and how hard we're working, or we can choose to gather around the story of what Christ has done on the cross.

So which will it be for us? Impressiveness or the cross? Now, I know, because you're all good Christian people, aren't you? And, oh, of course, we want to be people of the cross. We don't want to be impressive like that.

We want to be people of the cross. But how would you tell if you were people of the cross? It's easy. When you get home, ask yourself what you were most pleased with at church today. Was it that it ran smoothly?

[12 : 03] That we didn't start too late? That Steve wore a shirt instead of a t-shirt? That was a good thing for him to do. Or is it that you were left with the very clear idea that your only hope in life and death is what Jesus has done for you and not anything you've done for yourself?

Second thing that a cross-centered church is not, it is not logical. It is not logical. Look again at the passage. Look down at verse 19. Here, Paul, talking about the message of the cross, says that it destroys the wisdom of the wise and the intelligence of the intelligent.

So much so that he says, verse 20, where is the wise person? He says, they've gone. Where is the teacher of the law? Literally, the Jewish scribe. They've gone too. Where is the philosopher of this age?

Where's the expert of the times? Where's the professor who knows what they're talking about? Well, she's gone as well. Nowhere to be seen. Beginning of verse 21 sums it up.

Let me read it to you again. For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know him. Here's the point. The message of the cross, being cross-centered as a church, is the opposite of what you would be by nature.

[13 : 13] And it doesn't matter whether you're from a religious background, like the scribe, or from a secular background, like the philosopher. The message of the cross is so countered to the way that we think, that we wouldn't, given all the time in the world, we wouldn't have dreamt it up.

Why? Well, because the cross defies human logic. How so? Well, because the cross doesn't say the sort of things that we think. The cross doesn't say, do you know what?

Work really hard and God will bless you. It doesn't say that. It doesn't say, you know, sort out your life and God might then be interested in you. It doesn't say, you know, listen, you've got this.

Just dig deep, be mindful, live in the moment, be the best version of you and everything will be okay. The cross-centered church doesn't even say, you're a wretched sinner and you spend the rest of your life feeling terrible about it.

It doesn't say that. Instead, the cross-centered church says something that we wouldn't have dreamt up given all the time in the world. It says this, that at the heart of the universe, the glorious God who made us, the one who in his eternal brilliance did himself not need to be made, that God loves sinners, loves them.

[14 : 27] And not with like a kind of passing affection or pity, but in a love that willingly gives himself up for them in the person of the son, in his human nature, dying on a cross.

And you say, when you understand that, that makes absolutely no sense. Why would the God who did not need to be made become one of us in the person of the son and give himself on the cross? The people unlovely like us makes no sense.

And when you say that, you go, I'm beginning to get it. That's exactly right. The cross makes no logical sense. It's the opposite of what we would think. Honestly, I think this is one of the reasons that you can be sure that the gospel is true.

If you're sitting here this morning, I've got loads of doubts. I'm not sure whether this is true. Well, I think one of the reasons you can be confident that this is true is it's the opposite of what you would think by nature.

You know, when you come up with something yourself, when you tell a story that's not quite true and you're inventing it yourself, you always come out really well out of that story. Have you noticed that?

[15 : 32] The stories we make up always flatter us. You know, gods that we make up are ones that are like superheroes or ones that make us like superheroes. You know, they're distant gods and they're approached by acts of great righteousness by us.

Oh, well, if I come and pray or I fast, then God will be impressed. Those are the gods that we make up. You know, if I say the right prayers at the right time or I wear the right things, that then God will be pleased with me.

But the God who's real, there's nothing like that at all. Because the God who is real has an inhuman love for his people. And in the person of the son, he goes to the cross for them.

And that's not logical. Okay, the final thing that a cross-centered church is not, a cross-centered church is not appealing. Appealing. Again, look back at the passage. Look at verse 23.

What's the instinctive response of the Jews and the Gentiles to this cross-centered ministry of Paul's? What does he say? It's a stumbling block to Jews. They trip over it and it's foolishness to Gentiles.

[16 : 34] Here the sentence is that the Jews, they trip over the message of the cross. There's something about the gospel which causes them to fall over. We've seen it already. Religious people fall over or trip over the gospel because it offends their sense of self-righteousness.

Religion says, do this and God will love you. The gospel says, God loves you already in Christ. The gospel tells religious people, listen, you are way worse than you thought because you cannot cover it with your works and tells them at the same time, you are loved way more than you ever dreamt because God is more loving to sinners than you ever imagined.

The religion of the Jews was about status and heritage and moral performance and the message of the cross is about humility, undeserved kindness and owning up to your sin and it's unappealing to them.

So it is to religious people today. The message of the cross is no help to someone who is convinced that they're able to earn God's love. And for the Gentile which is literally the nations, the rest of the world, the gospel is unappealing because it just sounds nonsense.

It sounds crazy. Who would believe that, they say. Now there's loads more that we can say from the passage. We're going to say a bit more but hopefully you can see that being cross-centered as a church, having the cross of Jesus at the center of our identity as a church and as individuals, the story that we're going to tell week in and week out, that is not a recipe for worldly success.

[18 : 02] In other words, preaching Christ crucified, shaping our church life around that message, discussing it in small groups, teaching it to the young people, singing about the cross when we gather together, praying in line with the cross, understanding our identity in the face of the cross of Christ, none of that is going to make us popular.

If we want popularity, we need to teach rules or self-help. Those are the options. And we need to sing things like, I am dynamite or whatever it is, but not in Christ alone. Let me say, this is why being cross-centered as a church is so difficult.

Being cross-centered as a church and as an individual is not complicated. It's really, really simple. It's difficult because there's an aversion in each of us against it.

We will hate the unpopularity that it will bring. We'll resist the fact that it will bring out the worst in us and the best in God. We will long for something more palatable, easier to sell, a quicker fix.

Because being cross-centered is not what? Impressive, it's not logical, and it's not appealing. So why on earth would you want to be cross-centered? Well, let me show you three more things from the passage that will hopefully answer that.

[19 : 11] Being cross-centered as a church means these things as well. It means speaking the truth. Speaking the truth. Come back to verse 18. Let me point out something really important to you here. I'm going to read it again. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Now, the word in our Bibles that translated message here is the Greek word logos, which more literally is the word word. This is the word of the cross. Which contrasts with verse 17 where you have the word of wisdom, the logos of wisdom.

So here, if you like, are the comparison of two stories. It's the word of the world, the word of wisdom and eloquence, or it's the word of the cross, which is the power of God to save.

And here is the point. The message of the cross is important because it's the word of God. It's truth. It's the logos. Now, I think that's interesting because I think if you or I were writing verse 18, we would say it's the cross of Christ which is the power of God.

But it doesn't say that, does it? What does it say is the power of God? Not the cross of Christ. It's the message of the cross of Christ which is the power of God. It's the word of the cross which is the power of God.

[20 : 27] Paul is not contrasting the world's wisdom with sort of a silent belief in Jesus. He is contrasting the word that the world says against the word that God says.

He's not contrasting just a kind of religious experience with the word of the world. Instead, he's comparing the message of the cross, the spoken message about Jesus Christ.

Telling, declaring, saying what his death on the cross has done. That's the power of God, he says. Now, I hope you're thinking in your mind. There are loads of implications of that, aren't there?

But one really important one is that there is no distinction for us as a church between being cross-centered and being Bible preaching. I think I've got that on a slide, Niva, that says cross-centered equals Bible preaching.

There you go. You cannot be cross-centered without the message of what the cross means which is the message of the whole Bible. And you can't be faithful to the Bible without being cross-centered because on every page the achievements of Christ's cross are articulated for us.

[21 : 30] or to put the same thing in a slightly different way, you can't be cross-centered without preaching the Bible because it's the declaration of the message that's so important. It's about listening to the word of God instead of the word of wisdom and eloquence.

It means, doesn't it, in youth work, in Sunday school, in small group discussions, two things are really important, aren't they? Two things are really important. One is to have an open Bible and the second is to show how that particular part of the Bible points you to human inability to save and God alone can save.

Let me say, in my experience, it might be different here, but in my experience as evangelicals, we are better at the first one than we are at the second one. Right? We understand we have to open the Bible. We know that.

But we are really good at opening the Bible and telling people to be better. Or opening the Bible and using it to give people information. What you really need to understand are these stories.

Now, being a better person and understanding the stories of the Bible, both those things are good, aren't they? But that's not why God's word was given to you. God's word is given because it teaches you the message of the cross, which is what Christ has done and not what I have done.

[22 : 47] Open Bibles but not seeing the cross is not seeing God's sovereign power to save. We've not really understood our Bibles unless we've seen the cross. I could go on, but I've got years to go on, so I'm not going to do that just this morning.

Let me show you a second thing that being cross-centered means as a church. It means we have access to God's power. Access to God's power. We've touched on this already, but notice verse 18, the message of the cross, the declaration of what Christ has achieved in his death and resurrection.

The message of the Bible is to those who are being saved the power of God. In other words, this message, which is foolishness, illogical, unimpressiveness to the world is to God's people power.

Now, what is it God's power to do? Is it God's power to give me all I want, power to have a good week at work, power to heal me from every disease, power to put money in my pockets maybe?

Well, no, it's not, is it? Follow the logic of the passage. You'll see verse 21. Notice the same contrast. The wisdom of the world versus the foolishness of preaching. You see that? What is it that the foolishness of preaching can do that the wisdom of the world cannot?

[24 : 01] Well, it's enable people to know God, isn't it? By being saved by God. Here then, the message of the cross, being cross-centered as a church, means we have, listen, this is it, God's power to know him.

God's power to know him and be saved by him. It doesn't mean that we will always know why God is doing what he's doing in my life at any particular given moment, but it will mean that even in the midst of pain and suffering, even with the tears strolling down our face, we will be able to say, even now I know God and I know he's with me.

I can experience God, I can relate to God, I can delight in God, I can enjoy him through the message of the cross, which is the message of the Bible.

Think about it like this. I think I've got a picture for this. Imagine that a friend invites you out to go and eat burgers, okay? I didn't put a particularly good picture of a burger up because I didn't want you to salivate too much, but imagine, right, a friend invites you out and says, listen, I found somewhere new on the Kilburn High Road to eat burgers.

Let's go and eat burgers. It's going to be great. We're going to have an awesome time. Come with me. I'll show you where it is. So you go, you follow them, and you sit in the shop and you take a seat, and all over the wall of the shop are pictures of burgers.

[25 : 25] They look great. And you're sitting there and your friends sit in there and you're looking at each other and you're looking at the menu of burgers in front of you, and then your friend says to you, should we leave now?

And you get up and walk out a bit confused and they say, wasn't that great? Wasn't that a brilliant place? Didn't you really enjoy that? What are you going to say?

You're going to, well, that was rubbish. I didn't even get to eat a burger. I went to eat a burger. I didn't even get one. What a terrible, terrible time. Now, listen, it's a silly story, isn't it?

But that is like church without the message of the cross. Hearing the message of the cross is how the church gets to eat, and I hope this isn't irreverent, how we get to eat the burger of the delights of God's goodness.

This is the feast for us this morning as we gather around the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, hearing his message, feasting on him. And it doesn't work if you don't preach Christ.

[26 : 29] If you come to church and someone says something other than the message of the cross of Christ, it's like going to a burger restaurant and not getting to eat one. Or if you don't come, well, it's like not even turning up anyway, isn't it?

Actually, gathering as a church around the message of the cross is how we delight in God, how we get to feast on him. It's the power of God to save, the power of God for us to know him and delight in him.

Finally, a cross-centered church means a divided church, a divided church. Now, I put it like that, which I think should be on the next screen, being divided.

I've put it like that to make you sit up and listen, because I knew this was the end. Surely you think, wow, division in the church, dude, that's a terrible thing. This is your first Sunday. Don't stand up there and preach division.

That would be a terrible thing to do. We don't want that. And of course, division in the church is a bad thing, but there are, or there is a certain kind of division that the cross brings, which is really, really important.

[27 : 29] Because a cross-centered church will expose a division in the church between those who trust in Christ and those who do not. Between those relying on human wisdom and those relying on God.

As we preach Christ at the center, it will make this division increasingly clear that there are those who believe and those who do not. And the temptation is then to change the message, isn't it?

Or to water it down just a little bit, a little bit, or be a little bit less focused on it just to mask that division. Because it means hard things, doesn't it? It means that some young people will stop coming because they don't believe the message.

They want the word of the world, not the word of the cross. It means some friends we invite don't want to come back because they're offended by the idea that God alone can save them and they can't do anything themselves.

Now, don't get me wrong. We don't want to be deliberately offensive. Christians can be deliberately offensive, can't they? I'm sure we've all got a bad experience of that. It's as if it takes some weird spiritual delight in being obnoxious.

[28 : 35] I'm not talking about that at all. If people leave the church because we are rude and unkind, then that's our fault and we should repent and find them and say sorry. Well, the point is that even if we are really friendly and really warm and really welcoming, even if the welcome at church is amazing, the fellowship is warm and sweet and the food is delicious over lunch, if we preach the cross, this division will become clear in the life of the church.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 11, Paul says the division becomes really clear as you gather around the Lord's table because some people are allowed to eat it and others are not. Literally, as we eat the visible words of the cross, which means that you really belong to church by believing in the message of Jesus Christ and his cross, not just by coming.

Don't say West Kilburn Baptist Church is my church because I come. You say West Kilburn Baptist Church is my church because I believe in Jesus Christ alone. That's why I'm here.

And that means, doesn't it, as we finish this morning, I need to ask you and I need to ask myself this really important question, which is this, do I believe in Jesus Christ and him crucified? Do I believe?

Do I believe that my sin is so bad that I cannot save myself, but my Savior is so lovely that he's done all that needed to be done to save me?

[29 : 59] Do I believe that? This morning, have I abandoned all hope in myself, every last little bit of self-reliance and thrown myself on Jesus? Do I see myself, before I see myself as anything else, I'm a person defined by the story of what Jesus has done for me?

I'm a child of the cross. That the most foundational thing is that I belong to Jesus. He loves me. He died for me that I might be forgiven.

Do you believe that? Because if you do, then welcome. Welcome to a company of unimpressive, illogical, unappealing people who have access to the truth of God, experience the power of God and know God through the thick and thin of life and stretching into eternity.

There's no better place to be. Let me pray as I close. heavenly Father, thank you so much for all that you've done for us in the Lord Jesus.

Thank you for this indescribable love that you have for sinful people even like us. and we thank you that you've saved us not by what we have done but by what Christ has done for us.

[31 : 31] So we delight in that and we feast on that this morning. In Jesus' name. Amen.