

“Whose Fool Are You?”

It's interesting how, over the years, some of the greatest men and women of all time have been laughed at in their own generation. Some of the most far-reaching ideas and world-changing discoveries have been met with ridicule and disbelief.

For example, the 16th century astronomer, Copernicus, proposed that the earth goes around the sun, not the sun around the earth. His ideas were supported by Galileo, and (later on) by Sir Isaac Newton. Before proven to be true (and accepted) by the general populous, there was strong opposition from both the scientific and church communities.

Just over two hundred years ago, in our own country, they laughed when Robert Fulton sent a boat up the Hudson River. It traveled at the breath-taking speed of almost five miles an hour. They called it “Fulton's Folly.”

The Wright brothers and some of their first attempts at air travel is another example, and we could list many more, especially in today's technological world. Today's fools are often times tomorrow's heroes. (That ought to a lot of us at least a glimmer of hope!) It is even said that they laughed at Thomas Edison, but he made light of it! (That's a joke.)

To bring this to a deeper and, (certainly) more important level, there was once a man who walked this earth who claimed to be God himself. Talk about a laughing matter. For many people, that was the ultimate. And (interestingly) they were right. It was – the ultimate claim. If false, then what a joke! It almost borders on being pathetic. But if true, then what a truth it was, and what a truth it still is.

Jesus is, without question, one of, if not, the best example of a man who was rejected by the people of his day. The claims he made about himself, the things he taught about how we are to live, seemed (to many) to be a strange mixture of profound moral truth and ridiculous absurdity.

He claimed to be the Son of God, and (at the same time) said he would die on a cross like a criminal. He promised that his was the only way to find life, and yet he lost his life in one of the most gruesome ways ever devised by man. And, if that were not enough, he also promised that after three days in the grave, he would come back. And some (even many) said that he actually did.

You can't have it both ways in life. Either it was true, or it was not. Either Jesus was a fool, as were those who believed in him, or he was actually who claimed to be, and his way (as he claimed) truly is the only way to find life.

Two thousand years later, more than a billion people on this earth say that they are his followers. (That's quite a number.) To them, the cross and the resurrection make sense, while many others still dismiss it as foolishness. It has always been that way and, perhaps, always will, as long as this world lasts.

Go down the list: Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Fulton, the Wright brothers, and Edison. These men have all been vindicated. Only the ignorant or the insane would now deny what they (long ago) said and did.

But with Jesus? It's still controversial. With Jesus, the verdict is still out. And how unfortunate, because (with Jesus), the stakes are infinitely higher.

Just think about it. You could choose to believe that the sun travels around the earth and still be OK. (You'd be wrong, but it wouldn't ultimately matter.) But with Jesus, it's a different question and it does ultimately matter.

If what he claimed is not true, and his death and resurrection never happened, then his followers (then and now) are nothing more than fools. But if it was true and those events actually took place...then someone still is a fool, someones still are.

As so we come to week five in this series designed to challenge us to take the “Next Steps” in our faith-walk with Christ. And so we come to one of the most challenging passages in the Bible, one of the most important cross roads we'll ever face. Of all the aspects of Jesus' life and ministry and calling that seem to give people trouble, the cross (and its implications for life) stands at the front.

Even for Peter, who (in our text) makes such a bold confession of faith, declaring that “Jesus is the Christ,” this talk about the cross was a conversation not easy to accept. Only later on did it make sense to Peter. Only after it actually happened did it fall into place.

It’s not surprising that this passage comes at the midpoint in Mark’s gospel. It’s that around which everything (in his story) revolves. Nor is it surprising (or coincidental) that it comes right in the middle of this series in which we’re being challenged to figure out what place in life we might give to Christ. The cross of Jesus is at the center of our faith. The cross of Christ is the central teaching in what we believe to be true.

In our second reading today, the apostle Paul states it clearly. “Jews demand miraculous signs (he says) 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.”

What’s the problem with the cross? Why is the cross so offensive? In those days, you could understand it. Only the worst of the worst would end up on a cross. Even the word, used in the text, for “stumbling block” was the Greek word “scandalon”. The cross was scandalous. It was totally unacceptable...and it’s easy to understand why.

But today? Why is the cross of Jesus still a scandal? Why is it (for some) a teaching and a truth hard to accept, while for others it’s the very sign of their salvation?

There’s a paradox in the Christian faith when it comes to the cross. “The very stone which the builders rejected (Jesus said) has become the head of the corner.” The cross is the turning point in life. It’s that point (in life) where a decision has to be made.

The word “cross” comes from the same root as the word “crisis.” Even its shape makes it clear that a choice needs to be made. When you come to a crossroad, you have to decide. Do I go straight? Do I turn left? Do I go right? The cross of Jesus is a crossroad for people. Where do I go with the cross of Jesus? What do I do with this man called the Christ and his cross?

Don’t be fooled. Everyone does something with the cross. It’s one of those “inevitables” in life that has to be faced. No matter who you are, you either accept it (and its answer) as it deals with your sin, or you reject it and its truth in an attempt to find one of your own.

No matter what you do, you end up with a religion. Everyone in life has a religion, even the non-religious believe something. Either a religion of their own making (or someone else’s) that ignores (and rejects) the cross of Jesus, or one of God’s making that takes head-on the reality of our sin. Either way, you end up with a religion. Only one way, will you end up with the truth.

That was Peter’s problem when he first heard about what Jesus was going to do. (You remember the story.) Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “There’s no way you’re ending up on a cross,” he said. “There’s no way you are going to suffer and die.”

Jesus didn’t hold back. He turned and looked at his disciples and then he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” is what he said. “For you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

Religion without the cross is still a religion, but it provides no good (and lasting) answer to sin. It might be filled with moral platitudes and have right behavior (in life) at its core, but it has little more. Christianity without the cross of Jesus is as empty as it gets.

Talk about Fulton’s folly. What fools we must be to believe that the eternal destiny of all humanity is tied up with a man from Galilee, who died on a Roman cross in the land of Judea, more than 2000 years ago. In the eyes of the world, it’s foolishness to believe that in this one called the Christ our relationship with God is secure, and that in his death we find life.

As Paul puts it, “We are fools for Christ’s sake.” We are of all people “most to pitied” if it’s not true. But if it is true and if it did actually happen?

It’s like the man walking down the street with one of those two-sided billboards used for advertising. (You’ve seen the kind.) On the front side it said, “A fool for Christ’s sake.” On the back, as he walked by, and people stared, it read, “Whose fool are you?”

That’s the ultimate question in life. Whose fool in life are you? Whose folly in life are you choosing to follow? We’re all fools in this life, apart from Jesus. It’s all foolishness, without the cross.

But it doesn’t stop there in what Jesus told us, and so we cannot stop there in what we teach. There are actually two crosses in the Christian life. There are two crosses for anyone who chooses to follow Christ.

The one is where we find our salvation: on Calvary, 2000 years ago, when God in the flesh gave his life for us. It was the cross of Jesus that paid the price for your sin. It is the cross of Jesus that makes (you and me) right with God.

That's the first cross: the one upon which Jesus died. The second is the one in and (through which) we find the meaning of life. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Either way, it's a scandal. Either way, it's a religion in which a choice has to be made. You can choose to "save your life" (Jesus said), "but (if you do) you're going to lose it." Or you can "lose it (for his sake), and for the gospel", (be a fool in this life for Christ), and it'll end up being yours."

I hope you realize that. In the end, when it's all over, everyone ends up losing their life. No matter what you do or how you do it, no matter how much you accumulate and (in this life) think you gain, when it's all over, it's all over, and all you'll have left is that with which you started.

Whose fool will you be when it all comes to an end? You can gain the whole world (Jesus said) and end up losing your soul. Or you can give it all away, deny yourself (offer it back to Christ), and end up with more than you ever imagined.

This is all foolishness in the eyes of the world. This is all absurdity in the wisdom of this life. But it's the wisdom of God that put Jesus on a cross, and it's the foolishness of our faith that ends up being not so absurd.

That's the other paradox in the cross of Jesus. The hard way becomes the easy way. The way that appears as if life is being lost is the very way in which life ends up being found.

That's why Jesus (in his ministry) could say, "The way is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life" and (at the same time) say, but "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Figure out that paradox (in life) and you've figured out what life's all about. Put those pieces of the puzzle together, and life is no longer a puzzle.

Self-sacrifice, self-denial, taking up ones cross and following Jesus? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book "The Cost of Discipleship", went so far as to say, "When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die." Die to self. Die to the wisdom of the world. The New Testament is filled with this approach to life.

And so, how do you do that? It's not as daunting as we often make it. You simply turn over your will to his. Instead of you being first in life, from now on (in life) Jesus is the one who comes first. Take that "Next Step" and you're well on your way. Miss that next step and you'll never fully arrive.

If there was ever an age that needs this message, there is none more (in need) than today. It's the very thing (without even knowing it) that so many in this world are hoping to find, but don't know where to start.

It's always been there, this search for meaning. All the way from the "I'm OK and you're OK" philosophy (years ago), to "self-help, New Age, and EST" (when I was growing up), to the ever-prevailing enticement (and attraction) of drugs and sex and material things in which we think (and hope) we'll find life. Even in today's culture, people are desperately searching for answers on social media and the internet and the so-called "reality shows" found on TV.

It's not all bad. (Don't get me wrong.) Much of it is good. But it's not reality if it's not centered in Jesus. And it's not going to lead to life if it's not built in and upon his cross.

That was Satan's device long ago, when Jesus was tempted for 40 days. Any other path than the cross, and Satan wins. Any other path than cross, and life is lost. And it's still his device today, in your life and in mine; inside this church, as well as outside its walls.

Nothing has changed in 2000 years. You can gain the whole world and end up with nothing. Or you can give it all away (in following Jesus) and gain it all. It all comes down to a choice you need to make. It all comes down to which kind of fool you want to be.

The opportunity to sacrifice is in front of us every day: at work, at school, in church, at home, with our family, among our friends. There are countless ways to follow Jesus. Don't make it harder than it is. There are also countless ways to avoid following Jesus; don't make it your easy choice.

The text today closes with some powerful words, and these are the words with which I'd like us to close. Jesus said, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

There are two interesting questions being posed in these final verses. One: "Are you ashamed of Jesus?" And two: "Will Jesus be ashamed of you?" It all comes down to two crosses: the cross of Jesus that he carried for us, and the cross (in our own lives) that he calls us to carry for him.

Peter learned a life-changing lesson that day. Let's not fail to learn from him. Satan still offers a religion without the cross, and you can choose it if you want. But don't be fooled: there's a paradox (even in his offer), because (as Jesus said) you might (in accepting it) gain the whole world, but you will (in rejecting Jesus) lose your life. In contrast, Jesus offers you himself. To lose your life in him is to find it.

It's your choice. It's a cross-road at which you need to decide. When all is said and done, we are all going to be somebody's fool. The calling is to be a fool for Christ. Let's pray.