

## ***Living the Epiphany Reality: The Trembling Apostle***

By Dr. Dave Neale

There are two sections in the passage that you have just heard read in 1 Corinthians, chapter 2. One goes from 1-5 and the other from 6-12. See page 807 in your pew Bible.

The second section of our passage, verses 6-12, is a significant exposition on the basis of knowing; it is what a philosopher in our midst would call epistemology – the study of the basis of knowing. One of the key differences of the Christian faith with the modern rational view of knowledge, is that in Judeo/Christian thinking we describe the knowledge of God as “revealed.”

It has come to us, not by human ratiocination (*rash-ee-oh-ney-shun*, the process of logical reasoning). We believe that the nature of God has been revealed to humanity by God, through the history of Israel, the life death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and by the indwelling of the Spirit in the church these two millennia since.

***...these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God... Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.*** (1 Cor 2:10 and 12)

You can't get to God from here without the revelation of God. ***My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power...*** (1 Cor 2:4).

We needed to remark that.

I want to spend most of our time on verses 2 and 3.

***For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified..***<sup>1</sup> (v 2)

The first observation is about Paul's “decision” to concentrate exclusively on Christ's crucifixion as he proclaimed the gospel in Corinth.

He decides to speak of the cross because, of course, it is the vertical dimension of the meaning of the cross (I speak metaphorically). This is the “soteriological” dimension, the “saving” dimension; salvation for humanity comes through the death of Christ on the cross.

Says the Creed, “***For us and for our salvation*** he came down from heaven... ***for our sake*** he was crucified under Pontius Pilate.” This is all the Creed says about the cross.

Reform theology is known for placing the cross at the centre of Christian life and thought. Martin Luther called this the *theologia crucis*, the theology of the cross. I have echoed this notion when I've said in recent weeks that God is made known to us in the cross of Christ and that what we really need to know about God's nature is visible to us only in the sacrificial death of Jesus.

As the Gospel of John puts it in John 3:16:

***For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.***

The cross is how God settles the **vertical** human problem of alienation from the divine.<sup>2</sup>

Paul's decision to only know the cross among the Corinthians teaches us that, among the many layers and dimensions of the meaning of the cross, it also has a **horizontal** importance for the community of faith. In this case, the wild and woolly church in Corinth.

***Let the same mind be in you (plural) that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5-8)***

Paul believes that the work of the cross also defines how we relate to one another.

The cross stands not just between us and God, but between brother and brother, between sister and brother, and between sister and sister. If the Christ who emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... humble and obedient to the point of death resides between us, how can I be so proud, so cruel, so unloving as I often want to be with others? The cross not only liberates me, it also constrains me!

The people of Corinth (I belong to Apollos, I belong to Paul, I belong to Cephas) had forgotten that Jesus had died for them all.

Paul said, ***Was I crucified for you?***

Now to verse 3: ***And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.***

This is a funny thing for the great Saint Paul, the hero of the church, the first theologian of Christianity to say! But I'm talking today about The Trembling Apostle because *he describes himself in this way* to us.

We said last week that when you size up an individual's contribution to humanity that Paul was, arguably, one of the greatest of all time. Arthur Brooks described Paul as the greatest entrepreneur of all time.<sup>3</sup>

"First century convert to the teachings of Christ who organized the work of a messianic itinerant preacher into a body of coherent theology and spread it around the ancient world.... Which has grown for 2000 years and today has more than two billion followers."<sup>4</sup>

And yet, this man says I came to you:

- ***Weakness*** (ασθενεια, *asthenia*) What did he mean? There are a number of possibilities, all of which I find interesting for the man who became one of the greatest thought leaders of all time. It could mean "bodily weakness," it could mean "sickness and disease," or generic human frailty or weakness. Perhaps he had his own temptation? Or, interestingly, "timidity," which is where BAG places the meaning of the word in this context.
  - ***I came to you timidly***
  - ***I came to you unwell***
  - ***I came to you quite unsure of my task and its success***
- ***I came to you in fear*** (και εν φοβω, *phobō*) – not the good kind as in fear of God
  - ***I came to you in fright***
  - ***I came to you very anxiously and apprehensively***

- *I came to you feeling alarm about the whole mission*
- *I came to you trembling* (εν τρομῳ πολλῳ, *en tromō pollō*) *tromō*, do you hear the foundation of the word “trauma”?
  - *I came to you in much quivering* “When Jeremiah received the Lord’s word to preach, his whole physical frame shook...”<sup>5</sup>

### From the Text

What can we learn from this for our lives today?

Well, first of all I guess we learn that everybody has their anxieties and fears in life. Even the great missionary Paul, the Trembling Apostle. Maybe that helps you a bit?

It struck me as I wrestled with this passage this week, looking for the heart of the matter and to see what the Lord has for us here, today.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century there was extraordinary awakening in human creativity. Cervantes writes the first novel, *Don Quixote*. Shakespeare writes his works. John Calvin pens *The Institutes of Religion*. Milton comes soon after. In art you have Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Titian. To say nothing of Galileo and Descartes

But it is widely remarked that Michel de Montaigne (d 1592) was the first person to write entirely from his own experience; he was, it is said, the creator of the essay. I have a well-worn copy of what is referred to as *The Essays* right on my desk.

But here we are reading about how a first century itinerant missionary *feels* about what he is doing. I find that quite a remarkable thing. I think I just discovered something nobody ever noticed!

If you are living life you are facing some pretty tough stuff sometimes, and its hard.

Does he feel weak, does he fear, does he tremble because he knows he has to walk the way of the cross among them, a path of selflessness, a path in which his life, just as was Jesus’, is poured out for others?

Oh, it would be easy to roll into town and do some healing and be the hero. But this isn’t how life goes down. He knew that the cross was waiting for him everywhere he went. It would make me tremble too.

The Dalai Lama was talking to a group of young people and a young man stood and said how anxious and uncertain he felt in his life, ‘What advice do you have for me?’ His answer was what he says over and over in his teaching - altruism. Go out and give yourself to others.

***But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you – and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.*** (Phil 2:17-18)

We are not only a community of faith, a community of the resurrected Jesus, but we are also **a community of the cross**. We are a community in which we choose to serve and suffer with others, so that the healing of God, the Hand of God Extended as we say, becomes a reality. It becomes the Epiphany Reality.

The cross not only unites us to God, it stands between us and unites us to one another.

<sup>1</sup> Paul's theology of the cross is contained in only ten brief verses: 1 Cor 17, 18; Gal 5:11, 6:12, 14; Eph 2:16; Phil 2:8, 3:18; Col1:20, 2:14. HE does not develop a fulsome theological statement of the meaning of the cross. The most significant is the Carmen Christi, Philippians 2:5-11. There its purpose is to "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,...". Outside of Paul we have the book of Hebrews, which mentions the cross once in 12:2 (endured the cross, despising the shame).

<sup>3</sup> Within Judeo/Christianity you'd have Moses, Isaiah, Jesus Paul, Aquinas, Calvin at least. In Islam Muhammed of course, and outside of monotheism you'd have Zarathustra (Zoroaster), the Buddha at least. Plato and Aristotle perhaps?

<sup>4</sup> Arthur C. Brooks, *From Strength to Strength*, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, *Trembling*, pg. 892)