

"FOOLS FOR CHRIST"
APRIL 1, 1990

TEXT: I Corinthians 1:18 "For the word of the Cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."

As adults, most of us are probably safe today, but I can remember earlier days, when April 1st meant salt in the sugar bowl and schoolmates trying to look innocent as they told me my shoes were untied or my trousers torn. For today, as most of you already know, is April Fools Day.

This strange celebration of trickery seems to have started back in sixteenth century France, soon after the French adopted the new Gregorian calendar. Till then, the New Year was celebrated from March 21st through April 1st. And, when some people continued celebrating the old April 1st date, they came to be known as "April Fools."

Gradually it became the custom to fool one's friends and relatives on that day, and eventually the practice spread to other European countries, and, finally, here to America. Perhaps this morning, when your alarm went off an hour earlier than usual, you hoped someone would shout "April Fool" and let you go back to sleep. But no such luck. Like everyone else, we shall just have to wait till October 28th before we can get that hour back.

Be that as it may, this is April Fools Day, and since Holy Week is fast approaching, this seemed a good time to take a look at I Corinthians, chapter one, where St. Paul writes, "For the word of the Cross is folly 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 and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart." (I Corinthians 1:18-19)

How strange it is to hear the Bible saying such a thing. Almost everywhere else, in the Old Testament as well as the New, wisdom is highly praised and folly is roundly condemned. Listen, for instance to these words from the book of Proverbs: "Get wisdom; get insight. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you . . . Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a fair garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown." (Proverbs 4:5-9)

We need to remember, however, that wisdom, as the word is found in the Bible, always means more than just things

intellectual. It always involved moral and spiritual values, too. But there were always some, as there are today, who thought of wisdom only as cleverness in the ways of the world. So the book of Proverbs cautions, "Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil." (Proverbs 3:7) And St. Paul adds, "Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God" (I Corinthians 3:18-19)

There you have one of life's most basic conflicts. The wisdom of man, what seems right and good to us, versus the wisdom of God, where true happiness and life are found. And, in the words of Jesus, "No man can serve two masters." Nothing demonstrates that fact more clearly than the Beatitudes, especially as we find them in Luke's Gospel: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you and cast out your name as evil, on account of the son of man! Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your joy is great in heaven, for so their fathers did to the prophets." (Luke 6:20-23)

Or consider some of the other things that Jesus said. Like "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill, and whoever kills shall be liable to the judgement.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgement; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be liable to the hell of fire." (Matthew 5:21-22)

Or how about this one: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell." (Matthew 5:27-29)

Or this: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you do not resist one who is evil. If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." (Matthew 5:38-41)

Or this: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for them who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 6:43-45)

I am not making these up, you know. Jesus really said them. And, if he said them, he must have meant them. Bang, bang, bang, one after another, he contrasts the wisdom of men with the wisdom

of God. And no man can serve two masters. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (I Corinthians 1:25)

Now I do not pretend that all this is easy. I admit that I have as much trouble with it as you do. But perhaps that is what Jesus had in mind when he said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23) Still, which kind of world would you rather live in, the world we know, a world based on the wisdom of men, or Jesus' kind of world, based on the wisdom of God? A world with no anger, much less hatred; no pornography or sex crimes; no violence or retaliation? You know the answer to that as well as I do. "The foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

God's way is not easy, but Jesus did more than talk about it; he lived it. For who was ever more reviled or ill treated than he was? Yet, even from the cross, he forgave those who hated and cursed him. And, speaking of the cross, he did not have to die that way, you know. He could very easily have slipped away and gone back home to Galilee to live the quiet and relatively peaceful life of a carpenter. But he believed in the foolishness of God. He saw in the folly of the cross the power of God. And he was right. For it was through the cross that he abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel." (I Timothy 1:10)

And because of that, others, too, have been able to follow. Peter and Stephen, Paul and Silas, and all those saints through the ages, known to us and known only to God, who have walked in his footsteps and followed in his way. And, because of them, this world is a better place, a wiser place, a more loving place.

And we can follow too --if we really want to. Not perfectly perhaps, but we do our best. And the more we try, the better we become. Like Paul, we, too, can become "Fools for Christ." It is not easy, but it is not complicated. All it takes is to ask ourselves, whenever we face one of life's decisions, "What would Jesus do?" "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men." ". . . Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us . . ." (Hebrews 12:1)