4th Wednesday in Lent
Rolling Meadows - 1966

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 27: 15-17 Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them "Whom do you want me to release for you, Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ?"

THE CROSS AND MY WISDOM

I determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified - so ~~said~~ says St. Paul, one time great persecutor of Christ but now become an even great apostle, as he attempted to convey the heart of his preaching ~~among the Corinthians~~ & ministry. On the surface this sounds fine and good, and our first impulse is to say that we are ready to stand just where St. Paul did - to know nothing else except Jesus Christ and Him crucified - to glory in His Cross. Since at least most of us have been raised in the Christian tradition, we more or less blindly accept the premise of Paul's claim, and we would quickly give our mechanical assent to what the apostle says when he declares: 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 ~~ex~~ clever I will thwart." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand sings and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Yes, yes, Paul - you are right - Christ crucified - that is the wisdom of God - we want to know nothing else. We are surely not ashamed of Jesus.

But when it comes down to practicalities, this does seem to be a bit overstated, doesn't it? - To know nothing else but Christ and Him crucified? Surely, if you are going to be at all practical, this assertion will have to be modified. Pastor, we'd soon have to close the doors of our church if we carried this through to its logical end! We would lose most of our membership! What would happen to all of the boards, and committees, and organizations of our congregation if every time we got together,

we determined to know nothing else save Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I can tell you what would happen: they would be dissolved and abandoned as quickly as you can snap your finger. People just won't turn out for that sort of thing. They don't want to constantly be confronted with their sinfulness and waywardness, nor do they want their attention constantly focused on what their sins have wrought. They want no more than perhaps an occasional glance at the cross of Christ. Surely then it is higher wisdom - it is just good, plain common sense - to take some of the sting out of the Cross. The Gospel must first be made palatable. First you must attract people through other, less harsh methods. You must know how to appeal to them by giving them the things they want - gimmicks, socials, parties, good times - but not Christ Crucified: He holds no attraction! at least you must know something ele. Perhaps later, when people are more congenial and less on their guard, you can say something about the cross the Christian's allegiance to the Cross - but, by all means, be careful that you don't overdo it, or you'll scare them away. You simply cannot expect anyone in our wise and enlightened world to give himself so singly to Christ that all else would be excluded, that he would know nothing else. No one anymore is willing to dedicate himself so unreservedly, so unqualifiedly, so completely, to the Crucified. That may have been all right for St. Paul, but not anymore.

And yet, there really is no other way. Let us have no illusions or delusions about this matter! There are no compromises; there is no middle-of-the-road policy. God must first empty us of everything before He gives us a thing; God must first utterly crush us before He will raise us up; God must first reveal everything else in its folly before the Cross of Christ becomes His wisdom to us. The break must be complete! The demands are drastic! He that is not with Me is against Me, and he that gathereth not with Me scattereth.

The problem, as always, is not with God or His Christ, but with ourselves. We refuse to be corrected; we always want to operate with our own little gods who are false and therefore have to be destroyed if God is to God to us. We want gods which will permit us to do precisely as we please, gods who will never interfere as long as we are having fun, gods whom we can make over into just what we want

them to be in our own self-styled wisdom. If God were what many people pretend or imagine Him to be, He would never bother with us! He just wouldn't care! He would never expose our folly by the Cross of Christ. There would never be a Cross of Christ because God would refuse to become that personally involved with people like us! But God is God in spite of us, and in His love for us He raised the Cross of Christ to reveal His wisdom and thereby expose our folly. The Cross of Christ is the wisdom of God, God's infinitely wise way of healing us of our diseases and making it possible for us to be forgiven and come back to Him. The Cross of Christ is the full wisdom of God that is given to us, even making us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

There is no other way - and this is brought out very clearly in Pilate's offering the people a choice between Jesus and Barabbas. Pilate, the manipulating politician, the advocate of expediency, hopes to get himself off the hook. But he is still the servant of God because the powers that be are ordained of God. Pilate may think that he is especially clever when he comes up with the idea of giving the people a choice between Jesus and the worst criminal in his dungeons, but it is still God who is doing the revealing of His wisdom. Our folly must be exposed to its depths, even the folly of people who have the reputation of being good and kind and otherwise religious. The is what we must never forget - these are the best of people, not the scum of the earth. These are the scribes, and chief priests, and pharisees, and leaders of the people. This is so, because we must all see that we are involved. Everyone is there, even the best of us, especially the best of us.

What gets into people that they do something like this? There stands Jesus, known to the people not only for His claims but also for His deeds of mercy among them and His earnest pleas for them to return to God and be healed and saved. Alongside Him stands Barabbas, who was an insurrectionist and a murderer. And what happens when these religious people, these very best people are given a choice? They choose Barabbas and demand Jesus' crucifixion. How do you account for something like that? How could they do this when not too long before they must have

been on their knees in prayer and were looking forward so much to celebrating the great feast of the Passover that they would not even go into Pilate's court, lest they break one of their laws and therefore be prevented from eating the Passover? There is no answer unless we already know ourselves and the terrible contradictions within our hearts. Even now sin lieth like a great beast slumbering in our hearts, a terrible beast that can be aroused in a moment of anger or by lust to rend and tear everything that gets in its way. As long as we live, that great beast is within us, and we will never handle it by ourselves. Our own wisdom is no match for our passions and cannot even keep a good check on our desires, much less smother the flames of our prejudices and the fanning of our ego and pride. That's when and that's why we choose Barabbas and insist that Jesus should be crucified. That's the story of my life, choosing Barabbas even when I know better, still actually lusting after what Barabbas represents even when with my mouth I sing and claim Jesus Christ. And if we still refuse to admit that of ourselves, we are still fools and refuse to admit the Cross of Christ as the wisdom of God.

But if we admit it, if we truly see ourselves howling with that maddened mob of truly good people, then let the Crucify Him! Chrucify Him! really mean something. Let it be the expression of God's wisdom, the recognition that nothing less than the offering of the Son of God could adequately deal with what I am. I've chosen Barabbas because that's what I myself am in my heart of hearts. Barabbas - son of a Rabbi - has lived only for himself, thought only of himself, even killed to achieve his own ends - and Jesus, the innocent Lamb of God, takes his place and is crucified for him - as He took my place and was crucified for me! This is the wisdom of God! Christ went where I sent Him in my folly, and now He invites me: Come unto Me, and I will give you rest. Tell me, those of you who have stood there, what else can I do now but come to Him! Tell me, what else can I do now except determine to know nothing save Jesus Christ and Him crucified! Amen.