

February 13, 2011
Fools, Fops and Nitwits
1 Corinthians 1:18-31

In the book (and movie) *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, set during the French Revolution, Sir Percy Blakeney and his nobleman friends act like pampered playboys - in public. People thought they were frivolous, superficial idiots. As they flitted through society circles in eighteenth century Britain their dandy manners caused them to *"suffer the mockery of others, being taken for fools, fops, nitwits, even cowards."*

But really nothing was farther from the truth. As anyone who has read the classic story knows, Blakeney and his friends put on the foolish façade to hide their true selves. Behind closed doors, they formed the secretive *"League of the Scarlet Pimpernel."* In disguise they made frequent trips to France, risking their necks (literally) to rescue French aristocrats from the guillotine during the French Revolution. Their elaborate schemes, brilliant disguises, and dashing courage - in private - were in marked contrast to the ridiculous public persona people saw in English society.

Fools Or Heroes?

Any number of people have been mocked as fools over the years, only to be vindicated in the end. People thought Columbus was mad for believing the earth was round; they were certain he would sail off the edge. Public opinion snickered at Copernicus and Galileo who were convinced the planets revolved around the sun. In the 1960's, the CEO of IBM scoffed at the idea of personal computers in every home ... but those with that vision soon made it a reality!

And over the years some people have thought those who actually believe in God (and choose to live their lives according to His priorities) are a little bit loony too. The David Livingstones and Albert Schweizers of the world (wonderfully talented people, potential smashing successes in Europe) who chose to follow God, serving Him in other ways, have always been the object of skepticism and scorn - sometimes even within the church!

In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul wrote, *"The Message that points to Christ on the Cross seems like sheer silliness to those hellbent on destruction, but for those on the way of salvation it makes perfect sense. This is the way God works, and most powerfully as it turns out. It's written, 'I'll turn conventional wisdom on its head, I'll expose so-called experts as crackpots.'*

"So where can you find someone truly wise, truly educated, truly intelligent in this day and age? Hasn't God exposed it all as pretentious nonsense? Since the world in all its fancy wisdom never had a clue when it came to knowing God, God in his wisdom took delight in using what the world considered dumb - preaching, of all things! - to bring those who trust him into the way of

salvation.

"While Jews clamor for miraculous demonstrations and Greeks go in for philosophical wisdom, we go right on proclaiming Christ, the Crucified. Jews treat this like an anti-miracle - and Greeks pass it off as absurd. But to us who are personally called by God himself - both Jews and Greeks - Christ is God's ultimate miracle and wisdom all wrapped up in one. Human wisdom is so tinny, so impotent, next to the seeming absurdity of God. Human strength can't begin to compete with God's 'weakness.'

"Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of 'the brightest and the best' among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'somebodies'?"

When we do take our faith seriously, however, we occasionally find people wondering a bit about us: especially when we choose to pull ourselves out of bed on cold winter mornings that seem perfect for sleeping in (although, if you've ever noticed, lots of people do get going early enough! The parking lots at the ice rinks are full at unearthly hours! And when stores have sales, folks line up for hours to get a deal!).

At a wedding rehearsal, while waiting for the bride and groom to arrive, I was talking with the best man. After a few moments he asked, *"So why are you here? Who are you?"* To which I answered, of course, that I was the minister. I would love to have a photo of his shocked face; he blurted out, *"But you're so normal!"*

I have been a Christian long enough (and now a pastor long enough) that I have gotten quite used to some people thinking I am a bit odd because I take God seriously. Yes, people still look a bit askance at times (*"You had so much potential!"* one former professor lamented).

It used to bother me that some people thought, that, as a Christian I was a bit different. I tried to keep my faith very private; I never talked about my new-found relationship with Christ, about the meaning in life I had found in Jesus, or about the new value system I had discovered. I slid inconspicuously into church on rainy Sundays when nothing more exciting was happening.

But for some reason, people could tell that something about me had changed about me and they wanted to know what it was! It was frustrating because I couldn't hide it! My vocabulary had changed (for the better!). The things I chose to do in my spare time had changed. My general disposition had changed. And even though I tried to be the same old person, people saw the changes; they liked them; and they wanted to know what it was all about ...

When people at school or (later) work would ask about my faith, I got very uncomfortable. I

would mutter something under my breath and quickly try to change the subject.

The only problem was I was miserable and I knew something was wrong.

Gaining confidence

These verses from 1 Corinthians helped me gain confidence about my faith: *"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. 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 the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength." (1:18, 20, 25)*

Another verse that spoke volumes to me was Romans 1:16: *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."*

Paul helped me realize that those who choose not to look very closely at the good news of Jesus Christ may consider our faith to be nothing more than sheer nonsense. But those of us who have taken the time to get to know Jesus personally know differently.

We have come to understand that the love of God is real; that the power of Christ and His cross are real; and that the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is real. Being a Christian does make a real difference in our lives!

We know that the real nonsense is the myth that a world without God is really best (one would never be able to watch the news and still believe that!).

The real fairy tale is the belief that a life without God can make sense of the tough times and satisfy that inward thirst for spiritual answers we all share. We know that our message of a personal God who gives us new life is the only real hope for a world crying out for a reason to live and an authority greater than ourselves.

Wouldn't it be fascinating to "get perspective" on so many of the things that occupy our lives? Have you ever flown into a major city and seen all the cars scurrying around like ants? As the plane gets lower you can see people hustling here and there. Each of those people takes themselves just as seriously as you or I do ... but from a few hundred metres up it all looks so trivial! Imagine being in an airplane looking down on your life; so much of what we take so seriously is really trivial, too.

Robert Burns wrote a wonderfully humorous poem about perspective based on an incident in church. He was sitting in a pew behind a "fine lady," a beautiful young woman dressed in the latest, most expensive fashion. And on her bonnet he spied (of all things) a louse! Burns

remarks how curious it is that the creature wasn't on the threadbare flannel hat of an old beggarwoman; neither was it in the dirty mop of a poor boy's tousled hair. But on this snooty lady! The one who looked so spic and span wasn't really so at all! He concludes:

*O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us (Would some Power gift us the gift)
To see oursel's as ithers see us! (To see ourselves as others see us)
It wad frae mony a blunder free us (It would free us from many a blunder)
And foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us, (What airs in dress and walk would leave us)
And e'en devotion! (And even devotion)*

If only more of us could see our lives in perspective! It would free us from all sort of blunders and foolish notions. We would realize that the latest model car and fashion trend aren't really important. And the things that occupy so much of our time (the objects of our devotion), may not be all that important after all!

What's really important? Jesus!

Those of us who are Christians are like Sir Percy Blakeney and his League of the Scarlet Pimpernel. We sometimes do suffer the mockery of others. But in fact we know we have found the most sensible path in a crazy world! Some may even consider us cowards because we recognize our need for God, not believing we can do absolutely everything on our own. But at the same time we know with complete confidence that the cause for which we suffer is the only reasonable alternative in a world desperate for something to believe in. To many people, our faith will seem incomprehensible, irrelevant, or even crazy. But we know it is the truth. It defines our relationships. It clarifies our values. It gives us hope. It just works. We can be confident knowing that we have the truth ... and the truth has set us free.

Actually it takes more faith to admit we can't make it totally on our own! Real weakness is not having the self-confidence and assurance to admit that we really may need help!

More than that, we can take seriously our rescue mission of helping others discover the hope we know. Being a Christian in 2011 has the potential to be every bit as exciting, challenging and rewarding as saving French aristocrats from Madame la Guillotine! We are "The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel" of 2011 - we may "*suffer the mockery of others, being taken for fools, fops, nitwits, even cowards*" - but we are in the business of saving people from death to life in Jesus. As we reach out in love to others, we are the real heroes our City desperately needs.

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