

God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

In the name

What do you have a weakness for? Don Pietro Pappagallo had several weaknesses. The portly priest found it impossible to walk along the streets of Rome and not stop for a chat. He also had a weakness for good company and so as he chatted he would invite people back to his lodgings where his housekeeper would be preparing a dish of the thing for which he had the greatest weakness of all: pasta. In many ways Don Pietro was a very ordinary man, a very ordinary priest. He served in Rome and he had very human foibles. His weaknesses could sometimes cause him to be stupid and his housekeeper was forever scolding him for bringing back an inappropriate guest or eating too much pasta at lunch.

One day, however, Don Pietro did something *really* foolish. He broke the law. One of those inappropriate guests came to him and begged him for help. Don Pietro, you see, was a priest in Rome during the Second World War. Specifically he was there whilst the Nazi net on Rome tightened. The crime Pappagallo committed was to produce fake identity cards. At first one or two, then a flood. With them he saved hundreds of innocent lives. He did it for two reasons: one because he believed absolutely that it was his Christian duty and two because he believed absolutely that Christ had triumphed over death.

In the end, Don Pietro was taken, with a huge number of other figures involved in the resistance to a cave just outside Rome and shot. Before he died he was seen comforting his fellow prisoners and laughing, literally in the face of death.

The history of the saints is basically the history of insane people. So said Benito Mussolini, who had plunged Italy into the conflict that took the life of Don Pietro and so many others. In one sense he was right. Christians- and especially those who live lives so holy that they become saints- often commit acts which seem to those observing, to be mad. Don Pietro is just one good example. Partly that is because they affirm and then act on the truth which we heard earlier: that God's weakness is stronger than human strength. To make the centre of your life something which the world so clearly thinks is a sign of defeat and failure- like, say, the crucifixion- is sure to attract adverse comment by those who think they know the facts which stare them in the face.

St Paul- who wrote our first reading- wouldn't necessarily have disagreed. As we heard from the first lesson, his epistle, the cross was to the Jewish members of the Early Church 'a stumbling block'- because they found it impossible to put abstract faith in it and demanded further signs and to the Greek and Gentile members of the Church it was simply folly. Nasty, grubby criminals died on the cross

There are still those who today find Christ not radical enough and those who find him too radical, those for whom he is too abstract and mystical, those for whom he is not abstract or mystical enough. There are still those who see the cross and the resurrection and stumbling block or as folly. The timelessness of Paul's words necessarily poses us questions in the present day.

What things about Christianity do you find most difficult? Which aspects do you find most comforting? For one person the answer to the first might well be the same as another person's answer to the second, and vice versa. That raises another question:

Might both of our answers be more to do with ourselves and our own strengths and weaknesses than with those of God?

Realising that we don't have it all worked out, that we don't have all the answers, that some things do require faith in the purposes of God, is one of the great lessons of Lent. Sometimes, that will make us seem foolish, sometimes it will throw up stumbling blocks. Well, if it does, we are in good company.

In our Gospel reading we have Jesus doing something which also seems foolish and represented a stumbling block for many of his contemporaries. By going into the Temple and turning over the tables of the money lenders and traders he acts in a way that shocks some people in Jerusalem, meaning they assume he cannot be from God. For others his act is pure folly, pointless. However, the act is more important than the perceptions of those at the time could know. In the cleansing of the temple, Jesus marks himself out. He sets himself on the road to the cross.

Christ's action is a reminder that Christianity isn't always easy. That it doesn't always align with our own prejudices or preferences. That it doesn't always play things safe. Sometimes it disturbs as much as it comforts.

But that's a good thing. If it was simply about playing it safe, then the most important moments in it would never have happened at all. If God played things safe, then he wouldn't have been born- fully God and fully man, as the Christ. He wouldn't have set himself on the road to the cross, wouldn't have died, and so wouldn't have risen again. He wouldn't have bothered to transform our frail humanity. He wouldn't have allowed himself to be weak, so as to strengthen us. That strength though is not human strength, not the strength of the world, but that of God, that of love, love that is stronger than death.

Don Pietro felt able to do what he did precisely because he had such profound faith in the truth of what Jesus said. For him and for countless other Christians, fear of death was not a sufficient fear to prevent him from following Jesus, because he really and truly believed that difficult thing: that Christ did raise the temple of his body again in three days and that he will do the same for us at the last day. Affirming that will make some people think, like Mussolini, that we are insane. It will be a stumbling block to some and foolishness to others. But, but, at its heart is truth.

Lent exists as a time to prepare ourselves for the magnitude of Good Friday and of Easter, to point us to the cross and the empty tomb. Throughout it all we ought to have that truth, that truth which Paul so delighted in, that truth which Pietro Pappagallo trusted in so absolutely, that truth which we gather together to mark in our worship today: that Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead, for us. God chose to become weak, and in that weakness conquered the thing we think of as stronger than anything else. Stronger even than death.

This we hold to be true: the question for us is how will that truth affect our lives?

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