

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31  
GOD'S VALUES, OUR VALUES

Who are the World's most influential people? *Time* magazine has a list of the 100 most influential people, divided into five groups. I have picked a selection:

*Pioneers:* Sandra Oh, Naomi Osaka, Shep Doelman, Lynn Nottage

*Artists:* Dwayne Johnson, Glenn Close, Ariana Grande, Richard Madden

*Leaders:* Nancy Pelosi, Pope Francis, Donald Trump, Cyril Ramaphosa

*Icons:* Taylor Swift, Michelle Obama, David Hockney, Caster Semenya

*Titans:* Mo Salah, Mark Zuckerberg, Tiger Woods, Pat McGrath.

I thought when I went looking, that I would find lots of powerful, important, rich celebrities that "everyone would know"; instead I discovered that I only knew a few of the hundred; most of those I know have been listed above and shown on the screen! I expected people like Trump to be there and his political opponents; I expected singing stars because of the impact they have on popular culture; I expected sports stars because people idolise them. But there are so many others: pioneering scientists, Pulitzer-prize winning authors, people who are organizing movements under the radar, others writing about their experience of life and their struggles, some educating the leaders of tomorrow in Africa.

The opening of this sermon was going to be about the world and how the world is influenced by the rich and famous, by celebrities and powerful people. That kind of influence is there in the world, there is no doubt about it; if you have money or power or fame or are born into the right family, people listen to you when you speak; the debate about Duke and Duchess of Sussex over the last month or so has been interesting – will they lose their influence because they have lost their royal titles and no longer represent the Queen? Their influence will change, but will it disappear completely? I would be sorry if it did, because that will say something about the world in which we live! There is no doubt that being rich, powerful, famous, or noble does carry weight in our culture, but it's not as simple as that; there are a whole lot of other people who are none of these things, but who are good people doing good things and shaping the world in which we live.

How does the Christian gospel and the Christian faith influence the world? Paul's contention in 1 Corinthians 1 is that the influence of the gospel is cross-shaped! He is writing to the church in Corinth; he has already thanked God for their open hearts and has written about their divided church (he'll return to that!) and now he's thinking aloud about the message which the Church has for the world. There must have been people, maybe outside the church listening to the message, or maybe even some inside the church thinking about the message, who were casting doubt on a message that centres on the cross. "How can we convince people to believe a message about a cross and about Jesus' dying? How does the message of the cross and Jesus' dying *do* anything? It's a silly message if you want to save the world!"

*"Christ the..." (1 Corinthians 1:24)* The cross works; the cross is the right thing at the right time. This is the theme that he will open up in these verses. It seems that we have always had to declare these two things; even Christians have found it hard to understand the cross as the place where God saves the world, to trust in a crucified Christ. We have preferred another version: Jesus the teacher, Jesus the man of compassion, Jesus the champion who won the battle, but Christ crucified has always been a bit of a bone of contention inside the church and in our Christian mission with the world. But these two themes need declared again and again: the cross works and the cross is the right thing at the right time, the power and wisdom of God.

*"Where is..." (1 Corinthians 1:20)* In the Greek culture of Corinth, the wise men and the philosophers were the leaders of culture; they shaped Greek culture; they loved new ideas to discuss and debate. It was said that "on every street in Corinth one met a so-called wise man, who had his own solutions to world's problems." When these wise men looked at the new idea

that Christians were presenting, Jesus crucified, they struggled to see how it worked? How could Jesus be the Son of God and suffer? Surely the gods were above that kind of thing! “*Jews demand...*” (1 Corinthians 1:22f) When the Jews heard the message of the cross their reaction was different; this message was a scandal as far as they were concerned; the Messiah couldn't be crucified; God's special One could never be under a curse! They expected Messiah to be a great King, triumphant over His enemies; this crucified Messiah was a contradiction in terms; to the Jews it was ridiculous, literally scandalous!

“*The foolishness...*” (1 Corinthians 1:25) What to the first look seems silly and weak is the place where God saves, is the way by which God works out our salvation. It centres on the cross. The cross was a place of execution for common criminals under Roman law; how could that be a place of salvation? Being crucified is a sign of weakness and failure; how could that possibly be salvation for us? But that's exactly what God has done. The gospel tells us that Jesus did all of this for us; that He put Himself through the experience of the cross deliberately so that He could be the Saviour for us; the right thing at the right time.

There are lots of ways of describing this but let me tell you the story of a curtain. In the very centre of the temple in Jerusalem was the Most Holy Place, the place where God was said to live. Only the High Priest, and only once a year, was allowed inside that place, taking a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people. The Most Holy Place was surrounded by a curtain to keep people out! They couldn't come into God's presence because their sins cried out against them; their sins kept them away. When Jesus died, that curtain was torn in two from top to bottom; the way was now open for people to come to God in faith and prayer, because on the cross Jesus took away all that sin; He died that we might be forgiven and being forgiven we may come to God in faith, we may learn to pray in new way, we may come to know and love God as a Father who has loved us. “Salvation” is the short-hand word for all of this! The cross works; God knew the right thing to do for us and that right thing was for Jesus to sacrifice Himself on the cross in our place.

The cross is the sign of the church right across the world. No matter where you go, when you see a cross outside a building, the chances are it is a Christian church. Here's the reason: “*Christ the...*” (1 Corinthians 1:24) The wonderful thing is, people are drawn to this Jesus; to some the cross all sounds silly and far-fetched, but to others this is place where we come to know God in a new way, to love God because He has loved us, to trust God for our salvation. The cross has become the place where we discover that we are loved; where we discover that Jesus has saved us completely and forever; the place where we have to humble ourselves and trust Jesus rather than boast of our own goodness! This is still the message that the Church has to proclaim and the cross still has an impact on our world. It challenges the way we think about ourselves, that we should be humble because we have faults and failings; that we should be thankful because God forgives us; that we should learn to be like Jesus and be full of grace to the people we meet.

These are our Christian values. This is very different from the set of values that says “you need to be strong, powerful, rich, or influential before you can achieve anything!” We read the set of sayings of Jesus that we call *The Beatitudes*; perhaps this is *the* place in the gospels where Jesus spells out His sense of values, what is important to Him; we get some of this in a few other places, but here it is most of all. There are eight of these sayings, plus a bonus at the end; each of them has an attitude to adopt; they are very different. Jesus calls “blessed” those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who long for what is right, who are merciful, who are pure in heart, who love to make peace, who are persecuted for doing what is right.

These values are very different for those so often passed on in our world: children are told that they will only be valued if they succeed, if they pass exams, if they are first! There are people who chase the dollar, whose every waking moment is consumed with making money, in being

wealthy, and who will delight to show off their wealth in one way or another. Others want to be powerful and will stop at nothing to win power and keep power, even if that means bending the truth or behaving corruptly. On the other hand, Jesus tells us that being humble is good, that longing for what is right is to be valued, that truth is important, that it is a good thing to forgive, that living at peace with other people is such a valuable goal. Jesus not only told us about these values; He also modelled these values; if you want to see what these values look like in a human being, then look at Jesus.

How does the gospel influence the world? How can the church influence the society in which we live? Has that day gone? Are we simply an irrelevant minority? I have visited churches that are full of gold and grandeur – what do they say to the world? Any wealth you can have, we can have more? Is that the way for the Church with the cross in its heart to influence the world? The cross is God's power; the cross is God's wisdom – Jesus achieves our salvation there, the right thing at the right time. This is what we have to give to our world; we don't have anything else; we have a cross-shaped set of values that prizes being humble, being forgiving, being generous, loving what is right. We offer to the world a way: it is a cross-shaped way; it is a different way; it is a life-giving, life-enhancing, God-blessed way; Jesus is the way. For 2000 years people have discovered this way and found Jesus and found life and salvation; it has not changed; the cross is still the place of life and salvation. Embrace it; live it; tell others about it!