

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I've had some great readings to ponder this week that we've just heard. I've had a great insight whilst studying these readings this week, and it's this: you can't play Family Feud with the Bible, because if you try to take the questions from the Bible to use on that show it simply wouldn't work. For those of you who aren't familiar with Family Feud, and I'm sure that's not many of you, but for those of you who aren't let me explain. The show has a very simple format. The producers of the show come up with a list of questions, and then they go out and ask a hundred random people for answers to that question. Then the contestants on the show have to guess what those hundred people have answered.

You get points if you guess what they've answered. For example, one of the questions that I saw was this, "what other words are there to describe a restaurant?". If you were quick on your buzzer and you said the word "café", you would've won that particular round because 34 people out of 100 said a café, ahead of the 24 who said diner and so on.

There was another question I saw. "Name something that people needed to be careful of when swimming in the ocean." A whopping 66 people, the biggest number, said sharks. They've obviously not been to La Jolla because they could've said instead riptide, surf, seals, pollution, the list goes on...sting rays. For Family Feud to work the answers to the questions need to be predictable. The contestants have to guess what the other people have guessed, which is why questions from the Bible simply wouldn't work.

There are lots of questions in today's readings. Take the one from Micah chapter six, verse eight. "What does the Lord require of you?" What would be the answers on Family Feud? We'd get a lot of "go to church. Be good. Don't sin." I can guarantee that 100 out of 100 of the first hearers of what Micah said would've answered offer the right sacrifices to God. That's what they'd have said. None of those would've been the real answer, no. What does God say in answer to that question? "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God?"

What about the question Paul asks in that reading from 1 Corinthians? "Where is the one who is wise?" Let's imagine our 100 people again. What might they have said? MIT? NASA? Silicon Valley? Would anyone have said what St. Paul said? He answered the questions

where are the wise," amongst the low and despised." I doubt anybody would've answered that. In the Bible the right answers or God's answers are never the same as what most people think. I think that's what St. Paul is talking about in this passage through 1 Corinthians. He draws the strong comparison there between the wisdom of the world and God's foolishness. "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom", he says. That's an amazing turn of phrase "God's foolishness".

We might expect to hear about God's splendor, God's might, God's strength, God's power, God's beauty, but God's foolishness, that's an unusual phrase. What does it mean to talk about God's foolishness? Well I don't think St. Paul is suggesting that God is actually foolish, rather that his ways can appear foolish to our way of thinking. The greatest example of this is the cross. The passage begins, "The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those of us who are being saved it is the power of God." The Greek word here, which is translated foolishness, is the root of our word "absurd".

As a preacher I'm very aware of the absurdity of speaking about the cross. When I was a young priest I used to struggle to make sense of it. I felt it was my job to get into the pulpit and explain it so that people understood it. Now I feel less a need to do that, more simply the need to present the message of the cross rather than explain it. The message I and others are called to preach is that God was at work in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to bring about our salvation. The truth of that message is to be experienced as much as it is to be understood.

Notice how St. Paul draws the contrast here between the cross' foolishness to those who are perishing and the cross as the power of God to those who are being saved. It's human foolishness and God's power which are put as opposites. I've come to learn that we don't have to fully understand what was going on on the cross to fully experience its power. God's ways are not our ways, and our wisdom can't begin to fathom the apparent foolishness of God.

My father used to tell me about something that happened at his school where there was a boy in his class who had a reputation for stupidity. He was dismissed as the class fool. He got this reputation because if he was offered a penny or a sixpence, and a sixpence was worth two and a half times as much as a penny, if he was offered a choice between those two he took the penny. His classmates used to love to tease him. They'd go up to him with a sixpence and a penny

and they'd offer him and he'd choose the penny and they'd all go off laughing saying how stupid he was. After several years of this, during which the boy had collected dozens of pennies, my dad thought to himself "who's the fool here?" The so-called fool was better off because he'd never taken the sixpence. Of course as soon as he'd took the sixpence he wouldn't be offered it anymore.

My dad eventually concluded that the fool has been wise to take a different perspective to adopt a long term view of the situation, which brings me to that wonderful reading we had from the gospel of St. Matthew, the bit of Jesus' teaching which we call the Beatitudes at the start of his Sermon on the Mount. I think what we see here is another example of God's apparent foolishness. From a human point of view they simply don't seem to make sense.

Let's ask another Family Feud question. Who are those who are blessed? What answers are going to flash out on the screen? The rich, the powerful, the wise, the beautiful. That's not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is scoring no points on this round, because instead we get the persecuted, the meek, those who mourn, the poor in Spirit.

The beatitudes sum up the way that the teaching of the New Testament doesn't just challenge the way of the world, it inverts it, it puts it on its head, it turns it upside down. The kingdom of heaven which Jesus came to embody and to proclaim is an upside down kingdom. Things look very different from an upside down perspective. If you've ever been able to stand on your head, you'll know that.

The kingdom of God is an upside down kingdom where the poor, the meek, the persecuted, the refugee, the downtrodden are lifted up to the highest place. It is them who are seen as blessed, as loved by God. As St. Paul says, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." Notice the tenses of the verbs that are used here. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." It's a future verb. Jesus here is taking a long term view. He sees a broader perspective. He's talking about that kingdom of heaven which has started now, which is yet to achieve its glorious fruition. That's the kingdom perspective from which he looks at this world.

The challenge for us is to see things from that same perspective. When we hear the familiar words of the beatitudes, is that how we see the world? Do we have

that broader view? Do we stand from that perspective of the kingdom which is now and yet not yet? Do we see things in an upside down kind of way, or do we see things as the world sees them? Are we relying on human wisdom or relying instead on the apparent foolishness of God?

As I close, to put it another way, if life were a big game of Family Feud and the questions come up, are we giving the answers to life's questions that the world gives, the ones that flash up on the screen, or are we amongst those who are answering in accordance with the foolishness of God?

Amen.