

**A SERMON FOR LENT 3: GEOFF CHADWICK1 COR1:18-25:
GOD’S WISDOM AND HUMAN FOOLISHNESS**

We are about to enter the 2003 footy season. All around us will be images of team colours, avid fans and muscled athletic men with steely determination on their faces. Everywhere we will see images of perfectly tuned male body in the pose of athletic excellence. Such images are nothing new. In the ancient world sculptures and paintings of the best gladiators and champions of the games were common place. Perhaps you are familiar with the sculpture of the discus thrower.

Corinth, the place to where Paul is writing in today’s Epistle, would have been very familiar with such images. Corinth was a cosmopolitan place. It was a busy, bustling city with road links to several harbours. It also boasted a temple to the Greek God Apollo, the ruins of which still stand today. (Apollo was the god of divine distance and the forgiver of sins).

In the midst of all this came Christianity – but it had a problem. Christianity boasted of a crucified Lord. This made no sense at all to the athletically minded, Greek thinking Corinthians. How could God, who is perfect, be perceived in a mangled corpse of a body? To them a crucified God was foolishness and made no sense at all. Paul of course, makes a passionate plea for them to see otherwise:

*“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles... For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”
(1Cor 1:18 ff, NRSV.)*

For Paul, and for us, God in the form of a mangled, crucified human on the cross has much more to say about God than the well formed perfectly sculptured images of the ideal Greek athlete. The early Christians who began to understand this then had to subvert the Greek

thinking world. Christians began to fashion crucifixes – images of the suffering Jesus to be worn, to be put on display and to capture the attention of the public. The crucified Lord was deliberately put on display as an alternative to the Greek athlete. For them the message was clear, there is another way to God other than seeking after physical perfection. God comes not in the form of a hero of the arena but as one who is prepared to be broken, suffer and die. “God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor 25, NRSV.)

You see, in the ancient world there was an idea that spiritual perfection came from physical perfection. By toning up the body, you would tone up your spiritual well-being. Of course there is an element of truth in this, body and spirit are not so inseparable as to not influence one another, but the Greeks took it too far. Endurance tests abounded that you could prove your closeness to the gods; and those who had bodily imperfections were alienated as being far from God’s grace. And don’t think it happened only back then. The quest for the “body – beautiful” still obsesses many today; and the stigma of being other than perfect still oppresses many today. We revel in the sheer athleticism of our footballers and relegate the pictures of the maimed and suffering to the inner pages of the newspaper. God’s foolishness never quite seems to break through our so-called wisdom.

But it does. Every now and then we glimpse Jesus hanging in agony on the cross and we wonder what meaning that might have. Every now and then we glimpse the maimed and wonder what image that might give us about God. Every now and then we allow the broken-ness of the word to touch our hearts and we perceive a-new that foolish wisdom of God. A God who stands before all our icons of physical perfection, of great achievement and heroism and shows us a better way...

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The Lord be with you.

And also with you.