

Foolishness

Some time ago I read the book 1491. It's a history of the Americas prior to European contact. Perhaps the part of the book that I enjoyed reading the most surrounded two civilizations that sprung up almost simultaneously, literally right next door to each other: the civilization of Wari and the civilization of Tiwanaku. Each of these civilizations was named after its capital city. Surely, these are some of the strangest civilizations in history.

The thing that was so strange was that while both civilizations had cities, the cities looked nothing like cities in Europe, Asia, or Africa. Anthropologists have found that Wari's capital, for example, appeared to be built like a honeycomb. It had no markets, no public squares, and no great public buildings. It was just a series of cubes. The other strange thing was that the people who lived there didn't seem to throw out their garbage. Every room was strewn with refuse.

Tiwanaku, on the other hand, didn't seem to have any inhabitants at all. One anthropologist described the city as a cross between the Vatican and Disneyland. It seems that pilgrims went there to build buildings dedicated to the Gods. None of these buildings were ever finished- they were only interested in the façades. As soon as the walls were up, they moved on to the next building.

Another strange thing was that while these two states clearly knew about one another, they appear to have had little or no contact. The Wari of Cerro Baúl was perched on a mountaintop above the Osmore River. There are Tiwanakan cities in the valley below, literally within sight of Cerro Baúl. The Tiwanakans diverted some water for irrigation, but they allowed water to flow through for the inhabitants of Cerro Baúl to haul water to the top of the mountain. Yet, there appears to have been no trade between the two civilizations. The author says it was as if they lived in two parallel worlds, inhabiting the same space and time, but never interacting.

Now, what has any of that to do with the letter to the Corinthians? Well, Christianity arose within the confines of the Roman Empire. One of the real advantages that the Romans enjoyed was that by the time of Christ they controlled the entire Mediterranean basin. This allowed the flourishing of trade throughout the Empire; equally important it allowed for the free exchange of ideas throughout the Roman World.

There were two major sources of truth in the Roman World. The first was Greek wisdom. Greece was the birthplace of the discipline of philosophy. Answers to the deep questions of the world were sought through engaging those questions rationally. The great philosophers believed that only what could be reasoned could be believed.

The other major source of truth was the Jewish religion. In today's world there are approximately 7.5 million Jews living in the United States. They make up about 2% of the population. The Roman Empire contained about six million Jews. That was, however, about 10% of the Empire's population. While that doesn't sound like such a significant number, the Jewish religion had the single largest following of any religion in the Roman Empire at the time.

Judaism sought the presence of God in the Torah and in signs. Followers were constantly looking for the power of God to break into the natural world. They celebrated a history where God dramatically intervened in human affairs- during Passover, at the Red Sea, when Elijah was on the mountain, and when Ezekiel was in the valley of the dry bones- just to name a few examples.

Both of these points of view met in the cultural melting pot that was the seaport town of Corinth. It seems a strange place for the church to arise because Christ doesn't make sense in either system.

If we find God through human wisdom, then the church should have been filled with philosophers and academics. We have a few of those, but most of us don't qualify as members of either of those groups. If we find God in the Torah, the church should be full of scribes and Pharisees. Again, we have only a few of those. If we find God through signs, the church should be full of Prophets and miracle workers. Again, we have only a few of those. Instead, the church has always been filled with a mix of people: rich and poor, strong and weak, smart and not so smart, charismatic and quiet.

Paul says, "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are so that one might boast in the presence of God."

The Corinthians must have viewed the Christians much as those two Peruvian civilizations viewed one another- like they were part of some parallel world. They didn't look for truth in the mighty signs, or in reason. Instead, they found their identity in God's own self-sacrifice on the cross. Christians from different social classes would mingle and even eat at the same table. Christians tended to share all goods in common and not take advantage of one another. Christian, in short, were weird.

But it's different today, you say? Oh, really? We still do things that the rest of society finds strange. Instead of managing by objective, we place faith in God. Instead of putting all our money to our own uses, we give large amounts away. It must seem really weird, really foolish to those around us. Scientists, economists, and politicians must think we are bonkers.

But we see it differently. We take our identity from the God who sacrificed himself for us. It may be foolishness. But wherever the church is at work there you will find the very best that humanity has to offer. There you will find grace, peace, love, and justice. The world could use a little more of that type of foolishness.