

**St Mark's, Niagara on the Lake**  
**The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, year 'A'**  
**January 29, 2023**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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We're all familiar with the phrase 'to stake a claim', which is derived from the practice used by prospectors and miners of the Gold Rush who would literally mark off their territory by driving sharpened stakes into the earth. These days, we use the expression rather more loosely to announce that something belongs to us physically, morally, or intellectually. To stake a claim to something is to announce to the world our priorities and passions; it is to identify with something—or someone—in particular.

In the crucified figure of Calvary God stakes his claim; by Christ's Passion he announces his priorities and states unequivocally that his passion—his love—is for us and the world which he made. And so the cross invites us to stake our claim, too, to ask where we stand, and with whom; to ask what we have done to ourselves in the whole human record of mutual refusal and rejection; and, finally, to contemplate how we are called to embrace the cross in our own lives.

But— isn't this just another one of the preacher's pious abstractions? What do such statements actually mean? Well, in large measure I think that to embrace the cross—and crucified one embarrassingly spread-eagled on it—is to risk being thought a fool. This is exactly what Paul himself is talking about in this morning's reading from First Corinthians. One of the earliest depictions of the crucifixion shows Jesus with the head of an ass; it is an image no doubt inspired by Paul's description of the cross as folly.

And it's not just the cross which is folly. Jesus' whole life and ministry was in many ways an act of folly. The way he lived made no sense by worldly, conventional standards, what with his solidarity with outcasts, his extreme demands, his polemics against both the rich and devout, his death as a rebel and criminal. There's no doubt he was a fool. Which means he was symbol of contradiction and the foolishness of God. And those who follow his way become sharers in his folly.

So it follows that being a Christian, which means following a man who by the world's standards is a loser—to say nothing of patterning one's life after his—is simply too outrageous for most people to contemplate. Including you and me, if we're going to be brutally honest.

In the Eastern churches, the image of the *salos*, the holy fool, was—and is—a venerable one. These holy fools were men who practiced a peculiar form of asceticism in which they presented themselves as madmen, often walking naked through the town while engaging in peculiar behaviour. They were often nomads and pilgrims and

always figures of the absurd who appeared during periods of complacency in Church and society, essentially keeping alive the scandal of the naked, accursed saviour.

In his book *Perfect Fools*, John Saward argues that the holiness of fools shows itself most in their solidarity with the outcasts of society—solidarity which made them a scandal and offence to respectable people and conventional religion. They were not content with some early kind of “social work” but identified themselves completely with the pitiful of society. They saw Christ present in beggars, lepers, prisoners, and particularly in moral and mental outcasts whose behaviour made them intolerable both in conventional society and to the comfortably devout and pious. Saward also points out that they belonged to the prophetic tradition insofar as they pointed to the madness and evil of a world organised with scant reference to the love and mercy offered by Christ.

So today perhaps we will embrace the strange—and even troubling notion— that in some way we are all called to be fools for Christ’s sake, and that the work we’re called to do won’t make sense apart from our willingness to take on the guise of the fool. What’s more, we come always to the cross as fools in our spiritual nakedness and vulnerability. We come knowing that if it’s to be true to its nature, the Church—which owes its origins to the cross—cannot be the slave of worldly norms and stereotypes because conformity to the world is the betrayal of its foundation in folly and contradiction, and of its founder who rode into Jerusalem on an ass and made a sacred ass of himself on Calvary.

Thus the cross speaks to you and me—indeed to the world —of the supreme folly of a God who in the person of the crucified is the possession of the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, the hungry, the persecuted, and reviled. The foolishness of the Cross is that incorporated into it are all those whose humanity calls out to the author of all things—be they wretched or wealthy. The wisdom of the cross is that it’s the place where the divine love meets the agony and exultation of human life. The hope of the cross is that it’s the place where spilled blood is exchanged for new life.

In Christ crucified God stakes his claim by saying there is nothing we can do to him, nothing we can do to one another, absolutely *nothing*—not even death—which can withstand the power of his love. In this seemingly monstrous and barbaric act, in his being lifted up, Jesus calls out to all people and bids them follow. And for that supreme and glorious folly we give thanks.