THE CROSS IS RIDICULOUS

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There is a famous graffito in the Roman catacombs which shows a figure with a donkey's head hanging from a cross and the inscription *Alexamenos worships his God*.

The Romans knew all about crosses. They were a sign of the might of the Empire and the helplessness of the condemned criminal. They were places of blood, torture and agony. They sent out one message; "don't mess with the Roman Empire".

The idea of the cross being a place of triumph or victory was plainly ludicrous to your average Roman and no self-respecting God would ever allow himself to be nailed to one. And, yet, Christians went on insisting that this is exactly what their God did. No wonder they got laughed at.

Today, the cross has lost much of its power to shock. We don't have the first hand experience of seeing crucifixions that coloured the Romans' reaction. We've taken the ancient instrument of torture and made it into a piece of jewellery or a religious symbol. Devoid of its original meaning, the cross has lost some of its original offence.

But the message of the cross is still ridiculous in our day and age. When Jesus died on the cross it was not just because the Roman legal system messed up (though it did) or because he wanted to show us how much he loves us (which he does); he died so that people who are in rebellion to God could be forgiven and reconciled to him.

The cross tells us that God holds us to certain moral standards and that we are responsible for our actions and for the consequences when we do not live up to those standards. There are a couple of things that are completely anathema to our society today wrapped up in this. The first is the idea that there are moral absolutes - we don't like that idea at all. The second is that God would hold us accountable and will judge us for our actions. We like this idea even less.

As Christians on mission, we are faced with a choice. We can either play down the message of the cross and make it less offensive. We can stop talking about judgement, punishment and the need for forgiveness. It's much more comfortable to do this; it won't offend people and it won't get us laughed at. The other option is to be countercultural, to continue to teach the uncomfortable, edgy message that Jesus died and rose again because we have broken God's law and need to be forgiven. That's not so easy, but it puts us in good company.

I know nothing about Alexamenos, other than he was so open about his worship of a crucified saviour, that people scratched abusive cartoons into cave walls about him. That's not a bad way to go down in history!

> *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*