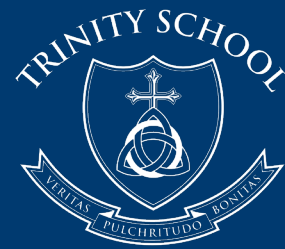


HEAD LINES

A monthly message from Chip Denton, Head of School



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

1 Corinthians 1:18

Palm Sunday, 2021

Dear Trinity Community,



When the two Marys walked to the tomb on the first Easter morning (Mark 16), just at sunrise, they brought with them not only spices to anoint Jesus's dead body, but also all their anxieties and fears. One wonders if perhaps they needed no help to wake early on this morning, if perhaps the horrors of the past days had kept them up at night. Crucifixion was designed to traumatize all who watched it, and it was designed to be watched by many. As the most public of all forms of execution, it "satisfied the primitive lust for revenge and the sadistic cruelty of individual rulers and of the masses" (Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 87). Only God knows what demons were whispering in Mary's ear that morning.

And only God knows what demons are whispering in ours as well. I am wary of those who are sure they can name precisely the malaise of our age, mainly because most of us, perhaps all of us, are asymptomatic carriers of the diseases we decry and the sins we despise. And so the demon I name today is one that has me by the throat as much as any of us. I speak of the demon of divisiveness.

We are plagued by divisions. The oppressed and the oppressors, the victims and the victimizers. The "back row" of America chronicled in Chris Arnade's *Dignity* and the elites that control most major institutions of our country. NPR and Fox, Red and Blue, black and white, the woke and the blind-privileged, the dog whistlers and the virtue-signalers, 1619 and 1776. And these are just the first divisions among us: our ideological mitoses go on and on without an end in sight. Our tribes balkanize into smaller and smaller groups of the pure and the right. Trumpians and RINOs, transgender advocates and TERFs, Episcopalians and Anglicans, Presbyterians and Orthodox Presbyterians. And being able to name these hardly spares us from the contagion. As doctors get Covid, so theologians die from their sins (Romans 6:23). There is none righteous, not one. Who will rescue us from this body of death?

The Scriptures too know a fundamental division. It is there in Psalm 1, and in Jesus's broad and narrow ways (Matthew 7). And in the text from 1 Corinthians at the top of this letter: "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing; but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God." It turns out that there are two kinds of people in the world—but not too fast. Listen carefully: God's ways are not like our ways, and his division is different. First, it is *his* alone. No one but God gets to say who is perishing and who is being saved. Second, God's divisions are surprising. The last shall be first and the foolish wise. Paul calls this proclamation "the word of the cross."

It is hard for us two thousand years later to grasp the sheer shame and godlessness of the death of Jesus. We wear golden and polished crosses, but in the beginning the symbol of our faith was an instrument of torture. The first chapter of 1 Corinthians is replete with this knowledge—any close reader will think, “Paul struggled with the shame of the cross.” Bonhoeffer saw this: “God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross.” “Out of the world” means excluded, shamed, ostracized. Today we would say “canceled.”

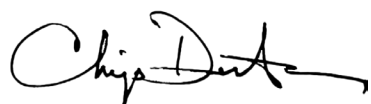
The Corinthian church was also plagued by divisions, and Paul begins this letter with “the word of the cross” because that is the word which divided people most need to hear. It is the proclamation of the leveling of all human distinctions in Christ’s godless death. It is the reminder that *all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). It is the only foundation of the unbelievably good news that in Christ God was justifying the ungodly (Romans 4:5—that would be you and me).

Paul is undermining our confidence that we can put ourselves on the right side of things in this world, on the right side of history, as they say. There is no level ground except in the kingdom of God. Pure meritocracy is a mirage. There will always be distinctions, privileges, inequities. There is only one place where the ground is level, and that is at the foot of the cross, where all our differences and distinctions are subsumed into the one question that matters: How will we respond to this crucified Son of God?

There is also much hope in this message. The word of the cross is not simply a message *about something*. It is the power of God. As Fleming Rutledge suggests (*The Crucifixion*, 17), on the cross Jesus was not simply *showing* us something (though of course he was doing that); *something was actually happening*. The creative Word of God, who in the beginning made the heavens and the earth, on the cross and in the resurrection of Jesus “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Romans 4:17). The death and resurrection of Jesus effect a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Our divided world needs new creation.

One of the questions that heads of schools ask each other when we get together is, “What keeps you up at night?” This keeps me up: the divisions among us at Trinity and the threats to delivering our mission when the world seems on fire. We could try to get everyone at Trinity to think the same thing, to persuade others that we are right (good luck with that). Or we could make this school the kind of place that would attract only certain kinds of people—conservatives, or progressives, or people who think that civil pluralism is the beautiful middle way. Or we could accept that the people we have here, the Corinthian-like community that is Trinity School, could gather at the cross and watch while God shows us all what fools we are and invites us to bow low before the One who humbled himself for us by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross (Philippians 2). I’m going with that, and I invite you to come with me.

Non Nobis,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chip Denton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Chip Denton
Head of School