

This is what we preach

1 Cor 15:1-11

Tim Anderson 18/4/21

Christianity is all about the resurrection of Jesus.
Sometimes people think Christianity is about a moral code.
Live in a certain way and that will please God.
That's not good news.
Because you can't do it.
Moral codes are bad news because we break them.
Christianity is at its heart good news.
Sometimes people think that Christianity is at its heart
about improving the world we live in.
But no.
This world is destined to pass away.
If you knew a bushfire was coming through tomorrow,
you wouldn't paint a house today.
Don't get me wrong.
Christianity does change how we live.
Christianity does improve the world we live in.
But those things are not the heart.
And if you miss the heart,
you have not got Christianity.
The heart of Christianity is the resurrection of Jesus.

Now I could have said that the heart of Christianity is the gospel.
The problem with that
is that sometimes there is confusion about what the gospel is.
Some people think that the gospel
is about bringing peace and justice to this world that we live in.
Painting the house today even though a bushfire is coming tomorrow.
So if you say that Christianity is all about the gospel,

everybody is nodding in agreement.

But not everyone is hearing you say the same thing.

Christianity is all about the gospel.

And the gospel is the message about Jesus' death for our sins and his resurrection to life.

So Christianity is all about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And unless you happen to be speaking with Muslims, the one that non believers are going to struggle with is the resurrection.

Everyone except Muslims believe that Jesus died.

Muslims actually believe Jesus swooned on the cross and then was revived.

That's a problem because the centurion certified he was dead, and the soldiers speared his side to make sure after he was dead.

And the red blood came out separate to the serum which is what happens after someone has died.

No question to a fair minded observer that Jesus died.

But only Christians believe in the resurrection.

So in terms of what contrasts Christians with the world around us, certainly the world we see here in Hastings, the difference is the resurrection.

Paul begins our reading today

by focusing the minds of the Corinthians in on the gospel.

"Now brothers and sisters,

I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received

and on which you have taken your stand.

By this gospel you are saved,

if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.

Otherwise you have believed in vain."

Why does Paul want to remind the Corinthians of the gospel?
The first reason is
he's wanting to remind the Corinthians of his place in their church.
The second reason is
that the Corinthians are in danger of moving past the gospel.

Let's think about the first reason for a moment.

Paul certainly had an issue
with some headstrong members of the Corinthian church.

In Chapter 14,

Paul had to ask them questions like,
"Did the word of God originate with you?
Or are you the only people it has reached?"

In other words,

You guys need to stop thinking
you can just come to any conclusion you like about this matter.

I brought you the gospel, the message of the Christian faith.

It's also been preached around the world.

You are not free to play around with it and change it as you please.

You need to respect God's apostle who brought you the message.

You need to respect the Christian churches in other cities.

We are one family,

so you are not free to go off on some little frolic of your own.

You get a measure of how headstrong some in the Corinthian church were,
from 14:37.

"If anyone thinks they are a prophet,
or otherwise gifted by the Spirit,
let them acknowledge what I am writing to you is the Lord's command."

Clearly there were some in the Corinthian church

who thought that their prophetic gifts

were a licence to act unilaterally and contrary to the apostle's teaching.

Paul's conclusion is stark.

"But if anyone ignores this,
they will themselves be ignored."
He's not talking about him putting them in Coventry,
giving them the cold shoulder.
He's talking about God ignoring them
when it comes time to take his chosen ones to glory.

So one reason Paul is reminding them of the gospel
is because it's the gospel he preached to them.
And he preached it to them under instructions from God.
They ought to take notice of him,
because their very salvation came from his preaching to them.

OK.

The second reason why Paul is reminding the Corinthians of the gospel.
They were in danger of moving past it.
I spoke a few moments ago
of some of the dangers we see in the church today.
The danger of people moving past the gospel to moral living.
Or the danger of people moving past the gospel to improving the world.
The big danger for the Corinthians
was that they would move past the gospel to spiritual experience.
They were in danger of getting so excited about their spiritual gifts,
especially the gift of speaking in tongues,
that they might forget about the reason for the spiritual gifts,
which is to build up the church,
the community of the gospel.
The gospel is the message on which we take our stand.
Not our spiritual gifts or anything else.
Only the gospel.
The gospel is of first importance.

In verses 3-4,
Paul goes on to remind the Corinthians of what that gospel is.
He begins,
"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance."
When Paul says he received a teaching,
he means this is a standard of the Christian church.
He didn't make it up.
This is what Jesus told him.
He uses the same form of words in chapter 11 about communion.
"For I received from the Lord,
what I also passed on to you:
The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed took bread ..."
Here, the teaching Paul has received
is an early Christian summary of the gospel.
It is in effect a creed.
The creeds we say in our services are much longer.
Here is a creed that condenses it to the barest essentials.
"That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,
that he was buried,
that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,
and that he appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve."
The gospel is the death and resurrection of Jesus.
What is the point of having a creed?
The Bible is a long book.
And at various points there will be discussion
about how one part or another should be interpreted.
These will be discussions
between people who we substantially agree with,
and also people whose reading of the Bible is so divergent from ours,
that we actually think they have departed from the Christian faith.
So when we have a divergence of opinion,
how do we know whether it's about a fundamental matter,

or about one of those issues that doesn't really matter very much?

The creeds tell us.

The creeds isolate those matters

which the church says are essential for Christians to believe.

It's the creeds that tell us that Baptists are fellow Christians,

even though we have bishops and they don't,

and we baptise babies and they don't.

Whether you have bishops or whether you baptise babies

are not issues about which the creeds speak.

And so we know that they are differences of a secondary nature.

It's the creeds that tell us that Jews are not fellow Christians.

When we say in the Nicene creed,

"God from God, light from light, true God from true God,"

we are affirming that Jesus is God.

And we are affirming that this is a matter of such importance,

that those who deny it are not Christians.

If they ignore this,

they themselves will be ignored.

We don't always say the creed in our services.

It can feel a bit like a mantra if you say it every week.

But there is a reason to say the words reasonably regularly.

The creeds are a reminder

of those things that are central to what we believe.

The non negotiables.

The things that are of first importance.

But here in writing to the Corinthians,

Paul keeps his focus even closer than the creed.

"That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

that he was buried,

that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

and that he appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve."

There are two aspects to this gospel message that we haven't yet mentioned.

Firstly, Christ both died and rose again - "according to the Scriptures".

Secondly, after rising he appeared to various folk.

What does Paul mean when he says that Christ died and rose again, according to the Scriptures?

Where does it say in the Old Testament that the Messiah would die and rise again?

The clearest passage about the death of the Messiah is Isaiah 53.

"He was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.

He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death, ..."

And that's passage the Philip used to explain the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8.

The clearest passage about the resurrection of the Messiah is Psalm 16.

"You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,
nor will you let your faithful one see decay."

And that's the passage the Peter used to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus on the day of Pentecost.

Why does it matter that Jesus died and rose again according to the Scriptures?

Isn't the main thing that he died and rose again?

Well it matters because that's what makes our faith

the fulfilment of the hope of God's people.
Sometimes people talk about Jesus starting a new religion.
Jesus didn't start a new religion.
He brought the revelation of God to his people Israel
to its intended fulfilment.
That's important when we present the gospel to Jewish people.
We aren't asking them to change their religion.
We aren't telling them their religion is wrong.
We are telling them their religion is right.
We are asking them to accept the Messiah who they've been waiting for.
That's important now.
Not so much in Hastings but if you lived in Caulfield or East St Kilda.
It was even more important when Paul wrote to the Corinthians,
because there were synagogues in every city,
and when many of the Jews in those synagogues heard about Jesus,
they were hearing about him for the first time.
So Paul was saying to them,
this Jesus I'm telling you about is the one you've been waiting for.

This message about Jesus' death and resurrection
being according to the Scriptures is important for us too.
We don't have physical Jewish heritage.
At least as far as I'm aware you don't.
But this give us clear signals
about how important the Old Testament Scriptures are
in the life of God's people.
Across the ages Christians have sometimes down played the OT.
There was a famous heretic in the second century called Marcion
who even tried to cut the OT out of the Bible.
But this tells us
that the Old and New Testaments are in continuity with one another.
And that's why we don't treat the OT like a warm up act for the NT.

But we honour it as God's word equally with the NT.
That's why people like our new Bishop, Paul Barker,
have given themselves to teaching it.
That's what he did for seven years in Asia.
He taught preaching and Old Testament
because it's important in the life of the church.

Christ died and rose again according to the Scriptures.
And then there a catalogue of resurrection appearances.
Why are the appearances important?
The answer is a bit different for the Corinthians than for us.
Both Paul and the Corinthians were convinced that Jesus had risen.
This wasn't a point of discussion.
But the Corinthians had spiritualised their own resurrection.
They had decided
that they themselves had already experienced the resurrection,
because of their great spiritual gifts - like speaking in tongues.
And so they weren't looking for a future resurrection of the dead.
They thought the new spiritual reality was already upon them.
We'll be looking at what the Corinthians believed
over the next few weeks.
And so by recounting the appearances of Jesus,
Paul is showing that in the resurrection Jesus had a physical body.
It was a body that could be touched and felt in this physical world.
And he was seen and spoken to by lots of people
after he was raised from death.
And that is the kind of resurrection we are looking forward to.
A physical resurrection of our bodies
to new and transformed bodies after our death.

Well the resurrection appearances are important to us
for a different reason.

We live in an age
where many people struggle to believe in the resurrection.
And you can't be a Christian without committing your life
to follow the resurrected Lord Jesus.
His resurrection is our future hope.
And the resurrection appearances
are one of the big pieces of historical evidence
that allow people today to believe in the resurrection.
The empty tomb, the resurrection appearances,
and the willingness of the early church to face persecution.
Those are the three piece of historical evidence,
that anyone who wants to investigate
whether the resurrection of Jesus was a historical fact
has to come to grips with.
And when it comes to the resurrection appearances,
this little tidbit in verse 6 is very important.
It's not mentioned in any of the gospels.
Only here do we find out that Jesus appeared to 500 disciples at once.
And most of them were alive when Paul wrote to the Corinthians.
It's an open invitation
for them to ask some people to check for themselves.
That's powerful historical evidence.
People have said that Peter must have been hallucinating
or have seen a vision at the empty tomb.
People have said that the 12 disciples must have cooked up a story
that they all stuck to.
As implausible as those suggestions are,
this one blows it all out of the water.
You can't have 500 people all seeing the same vision at the same time.
And you can't cook up a story that 500 people all stick to.
Someone is going to let the cat out of the bag.
And you can't write a letter claiming that 500 people all saw an event,

and most of them are still alive,
unless that's the case.

Otherwise there would a trail of people who read this letter,
and tried to check out the claims and were disappointed.

But that's not what happened.

People read the letter,
they decided the claims checked out,
and they circulated it to all the churches,
not just the church in Corinth.

That's why it's in the Bible.

Let me summarise.

Christianity is about responding to the gospel.

The gospel is about Jesus' death for our sins and his resurrection to life.

The gospel message was spoken about beforehand in the Old Testament.

And the resurrection of Jesus was a physical reality in this age,
and it was attested to by an overwhelming crowd of witnesses.

Friends, I want to remind you of that gospel
as Paul reminded the Corinthians of that gospel.

That is the gospel on which our faith stands.