

SERMON – 14/4/24

'The Easter Gospel'

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance, 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, that He appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve.”
(1 Cor.15:3-5)

If I was to wish you a Happy Easter this morning you would probably think I was a little behind the times. Didn't we celebrate Easter a fortnight ago? Haven't the Easter treats all been eaten by now? We sing Christmas carols for weeks on end even though the Christmas season is only nominally twelve days, yet many people think it strange to continue singing Easter hymns for more than a couple of weeks even though the Easter season endures fully seven weeks until Pentecost. The stories of Jesus' birth are contained in perhaps three or four pages of the Bible even if you include the Old Testament prophecies that speak about the coming of the Messiah. By contrast the Easter Gospel lies at the foundation of the whole New Testament and runs like a thread through it all and yet many Christians shy away from talking about it. There is so much for us to explore and to take hold of when it comes to the Easter Gospel.

The penultimate chapter of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is devoted to an exploration of the message of Christ's resurrection and for the next few weeks we are going to unpack some of what the apostle has to say here. We are going to sing and celebrate our Easter faith unapologetically for a while yet and I hope that by the time we reach Pentecost we will all be a little more confident in our faith and more ready to give an answer to those who ask the reason for the Easter hope that we have.

This morning I want to look with you at the content and the reception and the proclamation of the Easter Gospel; next Sunday I would like to join the apostle Paul in asking the question 'What if...?' What if Christ had *not* been raised from the dead? What if there was no Easter Gospel? Then, God-willing, we will explore what difference it makes if we are 'in

Christ' rather than simply 'in Adam,' Christians and not just human beings; and finally we will unpack the rich imagery Paul uses to explore the reality of resurrection life for the believer now and in eternity. There is a lot to get through in this chapter so let's crack on and see what there is for us to learn in these opening verses.

What we have read is largely a narrative of what happened, both to Christ in the days immediately before and after Easter but also in the lives of those who encountered the risen Lord, named here as Peter and the Twelve, a company of 500 people at the same time, then to James (the Lord's own brother) and finally to Paul who describes himself as 'one abnormally born' because he had not become a follower of Jesus until after he famously came face to face with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. But in the midst of this narrative there are three significant themes that emerge and that I think have an important message for us this morning.

First of all Paul identifies the *content* of the Easter Gospel; then he speaks about the way different people *responded* to the good news (not just those listed as first-hand witnesses of the risen Lord but also those who make up the church in Corinth to whom he is writing this letter and indeed those, including us, who will receive it down through history); and finally he has something to say about the various ways in which the Easter message is *proclaimed* in different contexts.

So, firstly, what actually is the Easter Gospel? This is what is sometimes described as the *kerygma* – literally 'the thing preached,' the basic message of the Good News. Here Paul proclaims it in stark simplicity in those three verses with which we began: This is what is of first importance, writes Paul: "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, that He appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve." That's the Good News in a nutshell – four simple statements about what we believe happened that first Easter. Christ died, Christ was buried, Christ rose again on the third day and He appeared to multiple people. The bare facts are not hard to remember and they are not hard to repeat. All of us will have heard them spoken about almost every time we have been at a church service and it's not surprising that it is these same simple

truths that are set forth for us to recall and experience through the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

There are a number of variations on the theme in different chapters of the New Testament – think of the few lines of an ancient hymn that Paul quotes in his Letter to the Philippians where Christ's life and ministry is summed up in just a few lines: "Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil.2:8-11) Or again in Paul's First Letter to Timothy where he is probably also quoting words that were in general circulation: "He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory." (1 Tim. 3:16) Simple statements of faith, like the Apostles' Creed, follow in the same tradition. This is the *kerygma* – the thing preached – writes Paul, and this is what you believe.

Secondly, what are we to *do* with the Easter Gospel? Again Paul is very clear and concise in what he writes to the Corinthians. He speaks of the message "which you received, on which you took your stand and by which you are saved." (v.1) And that is precisely what people in any and every generation are to do with the Gospel. It's of no account if it is just written in a book; it's not even enough to know the essence of it in some well-loved and oft-repeated statement of faith; it can be proclaimed from the pulpit time and again until the preacher is blue in the face, but if it is to make a difference in our lives then it has to be received and believed and it has to become the foundation stone of our life and the root of our salvation. It has to be taken to heart and, again, the sacraments give us the opportunity to make the Easter Gospel our own, as we are buried with Christ in baptism and raised to new life with Him and as we take to ourselves the broken bread and the poured out wine that speak of His suffering and by so doing share a foretaste of the life to come. My friends, is the Easter Gospel your own yet, or is it just a familiar Bible story and the subject of an annual festival? Take it. It's for you.

Because, thirdly, we come to the heart of what the apostle is highlighting in this opening section of the chapter, namely that this message is for sharing. His reference by name to those who met the risen Jesus that first Easter is a reminder that each of them bore witness to what they had seen, sharing their excitement at the victory Christ had won in the face of apparent defeat and prompting faith and new life in others still through the message they shared. It is from person to person that the Good News has been passed to us.

Paul uses a number of different expressions to describe this process of sharing the Easter Gospel. I love the vividness of the opening verse. Our translations speak of the 'Gospel I preached' – I have even heard people use the phrase 'gossip the Gospel' – but we get a better feel for how it sounded in the original if we translate it as 'the good news I good-news-ed to you.' The word even shares a root with the word angel (in the sense of messenger) which elevates still further the process that is going on here. But the apostle doesn't stop there. He uses the same pair of words that we are familiar with in the institution of the Lord's Supper – there Paul writes of the shared bread and wine: 'I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you' and here too he says of the Easter Gospel: "What I received I passed on to you as of first importance" (v.1) In other words he is part of a chain of handing on well-documented evidence that started with the core events themselves as witnessed by reliable, named sources, and handed down to this very day, this thing that we are doing here this morning: sharing the Gospel message, the *kerygma* – 'the thing-preached' – that I preach to you and urge you not only to take to yourselves and believe but also to pass on to others in turn.

Because that, my friends, is my challenge to you this morning. As I have reminded you of the kernel of the Easter Gospel, that Christ died for our sins and was buried for us, that He was raised again from the dead and appeared to many, and as I have exhorted you to take it to yourself and make of it the strong foundation of your faith, by which you are saved from sin and death, so also do I commission you to go from here today and preach the thing preached, to pass on what you have received and to 'good news the good news' to somebody who needs to hear it not just today but every day.

There are many, many people in our community – your neighbours, your friends, your family – who do not know the Easter Gospel. And still more who know the story but do not know its power or its significance because they have not received it or taken their stand on it. As a result they are not saved, they are not safe in the face of sin and death. If this Easter Gospel means something to you, then it's too important to keep to yourself.

So let us together know the Easter Gospel, receive the Easter Gospel, and proclaim this Easter Gospel so that there may be much rejoicing this Easter. Which is why I make no apology for saying to you again this morning: Happy Easter!

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!**