

Scripture for Sunday Feb 10th 2019

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (NIV).

15 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. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance:

that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

⁴ that he was buried,

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

⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.

⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

Sermon: Nailing *Our* Colours To The Mast

During the Age of Sail, ships would legally fight only while flying their national flag. In nautical battles, it was the custom to direct one's cannon fire at the opponent's ship's mast, thus disabling it. For a ship's captain to lower the flag was a sign of submission, and the opponents would cease firing and ascertain if the intention was to surrender. However, to nail the flag to the remnants of the mast was an act of defiance and signified the intention to fight on to the bitter end. That is the origin of the idiom "to nail your colours to the mast," one that has come to mean proclaiming ongoing *public* loyalty and support to a person, cause, or a belief.

That is one way to describe the opening of 1 Corinthians 15 and Paul's firm conviction in the resurrection of the body. In this chapter he "nails *his* colours firmly to the mast" and defends that belief, one that he considers to be *critically* important.¹ In this chapter, Paul comes to the last major issue to be addressed in this letter.² Apparently some members of the church in Corinth believed there is no resurrection of the dead.³ Paul fears those who deny the resurrection have abandoned a most fundamental conviction of the Christian faith and therefore their believing has been "in vain."⁴ This is a very important topic, not just for Paul, but for us – for who is not curious about the topic of the "afterlife"? We will be hearing more of Paul's argument over the next two weeks; in today's passage Paul is setting up the foundations by going back to basics.

He begins, "Now I want to restore to your full knowledge, dear brothers and sisters, the gospel I *proclaimed* to you; the gospel which, in turn, you *received* and on which you have taken your *stand*."⁵ He starts by establishing common ground by reminding them of the contents of the good news message. This is not something Paul invented, for he later says, "What I received I passed on to you."⁶ This brings to mind the image of a relay race; Paul has received the baton and passed it on to the Corinthians, who have received it and are running on. To now change the metaphor; they have not only authentically received the gospel, Paul reminds them that they too have nailed their colours to its mast! But he also adds a warning: "By this gospel you *are being saved*, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you."⁷ So what are "the basics" that Paul reminds them of?

¹ 1 Cor 15:3. For Paul, the resurrection of the dead is not merely some idiosyncratic speculation that can be set aside by those in Corinth who claim more sophisticated knowledge/wisdom, rather, it is of "first importance."

² Classical rhetorical tradition recognises that the first and last in the series are the most important, hence we have every reason to expect that the contents of what we call "chapter 15" to be of the great significance.

³ 1 Cor 15:12.

⁴ 1 Cor 15: 2,14,17,58. See also 15:30–34. Assenting to belief carelessly or without careful thought is what "in vain" means.

⁵ 1 Cor 15:1 (Thiselton's translation).

⁶ 1 Cor 15:3a. In 15:11, Paul suggests that it is the same gospel that all apostles preach. See also 1 Cor 11:23; Gal 1:11-12.

⁷ 1 Cor 15:2. Note that continuing present tense "are being saved" is the correct Greek translation (NRSV); *not* "are saved" (NIV). Paul's language (i.e., his use of rhetoric) is designed to shock, for his message is of the utmost seriousness.

The next four clauses appear to be a very early creed: “(a) that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, (b) that he was buried, (c) that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, (d) and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve (disciples).”⁸ These ancient words are the earliest biblical witness to the Easter events, since this letter predates the gospel narratives, and we heard their echoes in the Nicene Creed this morning.

Just a few explanatory comments about those words. First, the phrase “according to the Scriptures” means the key understanding Christ’s death and resurrection is to be found in Old Testament. This does *not* mean in a specific text, rather, the early church saw the gospel is a continuation and the fulfilment of God’s dealing with Israel and his earlier saving acts in history.⁹ Second, Paul doesn’t explain *how* the death of Christ “saves us” from our sin¹⁰ - that’s a whole other topic, and there are many possible rationales, but the key point is that Christ’s death and resurrection *are* connected to our salvation and that of the whole of creation. Third, “he was buried” gets special mention and signifies Jesus was undeniably dead.¹¹ Fourth, the Greek for “he was raised” implies that Jesus did not raise himself, it was an act of God.¹² Moreover, the Greek also implies Jesus *remains* risen and alive.¹³ Resurrection springs from God’s promise, God’s power, God’s act of re-creation, and God’s grace.¹⁴ This early creed is not *just* about past events, it proclaims Christ is risen Lord. Lastly, the creed ends with witnesses to the resurrected Jesus, namely Peter and the 12 disciples. As the noted Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, puts it: “The first Christians could not have successfully preached the bodily resurrection of Jesus if his body had been intact in the tomb.”

Paul reminds those in Corinth, it is on *this* tradition that they have taken their own stand.¹⁵ The creeds, then, perform a double role of a declaration of content and as a personal commitment to that content. It is where *we* also nail our colours to the mast, and for *both* reasons Creeds are important. Nevertheless, we need to be careful in simply *reciting* Creeds. At the end of the day, Christianity is *not*

⁸ 1 Cor 15:3b-5. (Paul uses “Cephas,” Peter’s Aramaic name.)

⁹ See also Luke 24: 27,44–47. Throughout 1st Corinthians, Paul has been trying to get them to understand where they are - and who they are - in God’s long story. They were in danger of forgetting their roots, ones that actually extend back into God’s story within the Old Testament (OT) Scriptures.

¹⁰ (a) “sins” is plural in this creedal statement, indicative of its pre-Paul origin as he uses “sin” in the singular, signifying a power. (b) “that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” can create confusion as there are no texts that explicitly mention the “third day” in the OT. Perhaps a better word-order would be, “that he was raised according to the Scriptures, on the third day”; see Ps 16:10 LXX. (c) *How* Christ died for our sins, namely *by crucifixion*, is very important for Paul, see 1 Cor 1:18; 23–24. (d) In 1 Cor 5:7 Paul links Christ’s death to the Passover lamb, not to the atonement sacrifices of Lev 16. In other letters (e.g., Rom 6-7) he discusses this theme further (and Paul’s views are the subject of intense ongoing debate in recent scholarship).

¹¹ It excludes any notion that he only *appeared* to be dead, and is also important in addressing Docetism.

¹² See also Rom 8:11. The OT frame of reference is that the resurrection is God’s vindication of his faithful servant son.

¹³ The (poor) NT translations of “was raised” loses that key point; Jesus is risen, Lazarus was raised – there is a difference!

¹⁴ Resurrection is not a spiritual achievement, nor an innate human capacity for post-death survival, but a transforming, gift of God.

¹⁵ 1 Cor 15:1. Curiously, when Paul goes back to basics, he doesn’t speak about the birth of Jesus, his miracles, or parables. Such things are indeed important, but not they do *not* contribute to the theme of this last part of his letter. Paul proclaimed the death and resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 1:18-2:5) and he calls the Corinthians to recalibrate their faith to *that* story.

a set of beliefs to which we give intellectual assent.¹⁶ Nor is it just a set of ideals or a path of spirituality. Nor is it a political agenda or a rule of life. Christianity certainly adds energy to *all* of those things, but at its heart is something different. It is the good news that because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, something has happened in history and the world can never be the same again. Receiving and embracing that gospel is discovering that the risen Messiah is the new centre of existence and the perspective from which to view all things. And those who believe that, and live by that, will never be the same again either. That is really what this chapter is all about.

Moving on. Paul did not think that the resurrection of Jesus was some sort of “truth” that was beyond historical evaluation. He recognised the value *witnesses*, for it is only they who can *pass on*¹⁷ what they have seen and heard to others. Indeed, it only because of that transmission that the Corinthians themselves came to believe in the good news of Jesus Christ. And so Paul digresses and lists others who witnessed the risen Christ. He mentions that “more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom were still living,”¹⁸ suggesting that they could be cross examined if the Corinthians wanted to pursue that.¹⁹ He also mentions James, the brother of Jesus and who eventually becomes head of the Jerusalem church. And, finally, he includes himself.²⁰ God uses some unlikely people to further his cause; that’s a persistent theme throughout the Bible. Paul is one such example, given that he began by persecuting the church, and that should give us all hope today. Not many people have ‘road to Damascus’ experiences; but something changed Paul’s direction in life and we are here today because of it. Paul’s point is that his own transformation was simply a *gracious* work of God.²¹ Paul is only alive “in Christ” because *God* took the initiative to rescue him and turn his life around. What was also a sign of God’s grace was the effectiveness of Paul’s missionary work amongst the Corinthians, which no one could dispute. But what was at issue was whether the Corinthians would stand firm in the faith or whether they would falter.

How does a church thrive and grow? That’s a huge topic (!), and last week I spoke about Paul’s emphasis on love as the means for the healing of factions.²² From today’s reading we can get some further insights. The Jesus-story is passed by from one generation to the next by means of witnesses to the resurrection. Obviously, we can’t witness that physical event today, but we can attest to the transformative power of that resurrection in our lives. And that is another aspect of nailing *our* colours to the mast. Each believer stands as a link in the transmission of that good news; we are simply called

¹⁶ Nevertheless, what we believe will shape the way we act. If we get that part right, the other pieces will fall into place more easily.

¹⁷ 1 Cor 15:3.

¹⁸ 1 Cor 15:6. This again speaks to the historicity of the event.

¹⁹ Those today who look for “proofs” that the resurrection occurred risk becoming like the “debaters of this age” who expected to find God through wisdom – 1 Cor 1:18–25; they will be disappointed.

²⁰ 1 Cor 15:8. As “one abnormally born” is a polite translation of an “aborted fetus” (such is the power of rhetoric!), the implication being: How could such a specimen *ever* live *given* that I persecuted the church? Answer: God’s grace!

²¹ 1 Cor 15:9-10 contain language that sounds to us like boasting! This hyperbole is part of Paul’s rhetorical technique to assert his authority (again – see 1 Cor 3:4-11) so that they will continue to take him seriously over this last key point.

²² See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/True-Love.pdf>

to proclaim what we have received and allow God's Spirit to work. If we don't pass on what we have received, others will not know and, eventually, that branch of the church will wither.²³

So we need to ask some searching questions: How has the gospel changed you and me? How has (or does) the risen Jesus appear to you and me, and in what way has that appearance transformed our lives and how does it continue to shape the way we behave and see the world around us? Some people's stories are dramatic,²⁴ others much less so; frankly, that is irrelevant, the question is do we pass on what we have received to others in a grace-filled way? Whenever Christ turns a life around, heals a marriage, transforms the heart, forgives sin, teaches of fearful person to love, or shows a greedy person how to give, there is a witness ready to take the stand tell the good news God's grace.

Many Christians are timid and uncertain about expressing their experiences of the presence of God in their lives. I understand that.²⁵ It even seems un-Presbyterian! Many Christians today have bought in to the secular lie that issues of faith are for *private* consumption only. The irony is that there are many stories in glossy magazines that probably should have remained private, and there are many things that we try to keep private but are meant for public consumption; our faith being one.

As Theologian Thomas Long puts it: "Christians are on the witness stand to tell the story, not because it is a likely story, or an advantageous piece of Testament, but because it is true. We know it is true because we ourselves have experienced it and witnessed its truth. And that is why we are on the witness stand and taken the oath to tell the truth, 'so help us God'."

Do you have a story to pass on to others?²⁶ If you don't, I encourage you to seek a fresh encounter with God. Holy Communion is to good place to begin. If you do, are you sharing it with sensitivity, excitement and grace? As you look back on your life, the difference God has made to it may be a word of encouragement for others and the seeds of faith. Paul, as the former persecutor of the church, did not try to hide his past; as I said earlier, he saw his own transformation as God's grace at work in his life. Our own stories of grace may be compelling to others, but there is no guarantee of that. But that possibility can only arise *if* we pass on what we have received. Are we prepared to "nail our colours to the mast"? Let us pray.

²³ As a missionary kid, this brings back to mind the old hymn: "We've a story to tell to the nations" (#765, *Book of Praise*).

²⁴ Paul knew that his 'road to Damascus' experience was unique, he didn't intend his experience to be normative; Christians come to faith in different ways. [Note, only Luke (in Acts 9:1-31) relates this story of Paul's conversion, not Paul himself – see Gal 1:11-24.]

²⁵ See also Luke 12:11-12 Matt 10:19-20.

²⁶ As the saying goes: "If it were a crime to be a follower of Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict you?!"