

Followers of the Way

Sermon: 30th January 2022

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The Basic Gospel

1 Cor 15:1-11

Evangelicals get a bad press. They are associated with extreme right- wing politics, regarded as intolerant bigots who reject any other view which does not accord with their own. This is a caricature of course; however there are those who claim the name Evangelical who perpetuate this popular caricature because of their language and behaviour. And not all criticism is necessarily outside the constituency. A colleague of mine was asked to comment on the state of Evangelicalism today. He said, "There's far too much 'jelly' and not enough 'evan'!"

Is such criticism warranted? And what does Evangelical mean anyway?

Church historians tell us that the Evangelical movement stems from the 18th Century revivals under the leadership of John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield. Others point further back to the 16th Century Reformation when what became known as the Protestant Church was originally termed Evangelical.

However, the true origin goes right back to the beginning of the first century A.D. The birth of Jesus at Bethlehem is announced to shepherds by an angel, a messenger from God, who says, 'I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.' (Lk 2:10)

The heavenly messenger, the angel, brings the message, the Evangel (good news, Gospel) for all people.

Jesus was the fulfilment of the Gospel, but of course it was prefigured by the prophets. Isaiah 61:1 –

'The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.'

The very passage Jesus read in the synagogue at the beginning of his ministry. For three years he proclaimed this Evangel, this good news Gospel, and his apostles continued that ministry after him.

But what is the essence of the Gospel?

I believe Paul gives us an excellent summary in his first Epistle to the Corinthians chapter 15. Corinth, the administrative capital of the Roman province of Achaea, was a city port and a centre of trade. As such it attracted a variety of people; Romans, Greeks, Jews – but also many unsavoury characters. Immorality was so wide spread that Corinth became a byword for loose morals.

Despite the mixed population their thinking was decidedly Greek which elevated the intellect and debased the physical. The belief was that the soul was imprisoned in the body and death freed the soul from its captivity.

The Church was made up of people from this background so Paul wrote to counter their moral laxity and spiritual immaturity. False beliefs had entered into their thinking so Paul had to issue a corrective.

He reminded them of the Gospel, the Evangel, the good news he had preached to them **v.1 READ**

The Gospel is what had brought the Church into being – Paul had preached it, the Corinthians had received it and were now taking a stand on it. The Apostle then outlines what that gospel is **vv.3-5 READ**

He had received it from others just as the Corinthians had received it from him, as of first importance. Many believe this to be an early form of a creed used to teach and disciple new converts. It is written in poetic form which makes it more memorable – '30 days hath September...' It summarises the basics of the gospel, without which one cannot truly call themselves a Christian.

If you asked someone - '**Why would you get into Heaven?**'
'On what grounds would God accept you?'

They might answer – good person...give to charity... Church...pray etc. All good and noble endeavours, but not what Bible teaches. Salvation, getting to heaven, is not about what *I* have done for God, but what *Jesus* has done for me.

Christ died – nothing unusual about that! Everyone dies eventually; but Jesus' death was unique because:-

Christ died *for* our sins – this makes all the difference. That little preposition 'for' literally means 'on behalf of'. His death was a substitutionary, atoning sacrifice.

This was the purpose for which Jesus came, to die in our place and free us from sin. And his death is not something that was hidden because it was 'according to the Scriptures.' The Messiah's death had been prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. Paul doesn't elaborate on any texts but he surely had in mind, among others, Isaiah 53:5 'He was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities.'

The whole chapter foretells of Messiah's death which is uniquely fulfilled in Jesus. Paul then states that -

He was buried – why add this little detail?

You only bury someone who is actually dead! Jesus really died on the cross – not fainted, Roman soldiers made sure of that. Also, Paul may be making an oblique reference to the empty tomb.

He was raised on the third day – he now mentions the resurrection, the whole purpose for writing this chapter, to counter the Corinthians misunderstanding. They believed in Christ's resurrection, but not in the general resurrection of all believers.

Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection: if it's true then Christ's death is a sacrifice on our behalf acceptable to God and we have hope for this life and the next.

If however it is false then the whole edifice comes crumbling down, we are 'still in our sins' and 'are of all men most to be pitied.' (vv.17&19)

P.D. James' Death in Holy Orders, Inspector Dalgliesh questions one of the priests about a papyrus that could disprove the resurrection. 'Would that make a difference to your faith?' The priest replies, 'I have the daily assurance of the living presence of Christ, why should I worry about what happened to earthly bones?'

But without the resurrection there is no assurance of the living presence of Christ! So Paul goes on to prove the truth of the resurrection in two ways -

According to the Scriptures - Once again there are various passages from the Old Testament that point to the Messiah's resurrection, e.g. Psalm 16:10

'You will not abandon me to the grave,
nor will you let your Holy One see decay.'

Written by David, whose body was buried in a tomb in the City. Peter speaks of this on Pentecost.

He appeared - this second proof of the Resurrection is proof beyond all reasonable doubt, because he was seen by eyewitnesses. In a court of law witnesses are called to give an account of what they have seen and a verdict is reached according to their testimony.

According to Jewish Law, every matter was established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. Paul tells us that the Risen Christ was seen by a whole host of people, including 500 at the same time, far beyond the legal requirement and conclusive proof indeed that he had risen from the dead. Many were still alive at the time so it was verifiable evidence.

This is the earliest account of the resurrection, written approximately 20 years after the event. If you witness something dramatic you don't forget it. You remember where you were when you witnessed the 9/11 terrorist attacks? Of course you do!

Paul includes himself at the end of the list of witnesses as 'one abnormally born.' (v.8) It's interesting that the Greek word he uses means an abortion, a term of abuse that, no doubt, had been hurled at him.

So this is the Gospel in a nutshell.

Christ has died, Christ is risen!

The Gospel, the Evangel, the good news that Paul preached, that the Corinthians received and were taking a stand on, and that saved them as long as they held firmly to it.

This is the same Gospel that saves us today so long as we hold firmly to it. J.I. Packer once asked, 'What is the proof of past conversion? Present convertedness!'

Being a Christian is not all about one moment in your past, but daily living in repentance and faith in the present.

As we have received, believe and hold firm to the Gospel, may we also pass it on to others as of first importance.

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!**Hallelujah!**