Handing over the gospel

Text: 1 Corinthians 15:3-10

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**Scriptures:** Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 28:16-20; 1 Corinthians 15:1-15

**Songs Chosen:** ‘See what a morning’, [SttL] 301, 16b, 434, ‘Behold the Lamb’, 313, 23, 326, 531+532

Series: Occasional (Easter)

Theme: The Apostle Paul summarises the gospel for the Corinthian church by emphasizing the substitutionary death and bodily resurrection of Christ, as prophesied in the Old Testament Scriptures and confirmed by many eyewitness testimonies and by the transformation of the lives of converts, like Paul.

Proposition: Like Paul, we are called to hand over the gospel which we have received.

Introduction

Children, how many of you have played the party game ‘pass the parcel’? There’s a present wrapped up in many layers of paper which gets passed around from one person to the next until the music which has been playing stops. Whoever has the parcel is then allowed to take one layer of packaging off. Once the music starts again, the person holding the parcel must pass it on again.

In our text, the Apostle Paul is not writing about a parcel, but about a message – the gospel -the good news that God, through His Son Jesus Christ, has fulfilled his promise to save a people for Himself. He reminds the Corinthian church that they had already received this good news, just as he himself had received it earlier and passed it onto them. He writes in v3: “*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received*”. The Greek word translated ‘delivered’ literally means ‘to hand over’.

The action of handing over can be very good e.g. When Jesus confirmed that: “*All things have been handed over to me by my Father*” (Matt 11:27); or very bad e.g. When Jesus prophesied his coming betrayal by Judas Iscariot "*The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him*” (Mark 9:31).

When Paul uses the word ‘delivered’ here he is writing about something very good, the passing on of the gospel message to those who had received it in Corinth. He then identifies the heart of the gospel and a number of evidences for the truth of this message of salvation

Which brings us to the first of our two points this morning:

1. **The heart of the gospel**

There are some Christians who say, ‘No creed but Christ!’ By which they mean, no other statement of faith but the Bible. The Bible is the only rule for faith and life, the primary authority which we confess as Christians. However, it has been helpful throughout history to summarise what believers believe in ‘creeds’. We have examples of these in Scripture itself. "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one*” (Deut 6:4). Also in our text this morning: “*Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures”.*

The Apostle Paul had left Corinth sometime between AD51-52. We know this from the reference in Acts 18:12 which identifies the proconsul Gallio in Corinth at the same time as Paul. 1st Corinthians was written about 3 years later. That’s over 20 years since Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. It is generally agreed by New Testament Christian scholars that Paul repeats an early statement of faith – a creed – which was common throughout the early New Testament churches as a summary expression of the gospel. These few words summarise the key elements, the very heart, of the Bible’s message of salvation as follows:

1. **Firstly** ‘*Christ died for our sins*’ – there is so much theology in these 5 words! Christ died as a consequence of sin, to pay the price of death in order to satisfy the perfect justice of God. This is **atonement**. Christ died, not for his own sins, for he had none, but for the sins of others. He **substituted** Himself for others. ‘*Christ died for our sins*’ conveys in summary the core gospel component of **substitutionary atonement** – Jesus died in the place of others who have sinned, who have rebelled against God and deserve death.

The phrase ‘*in accordance with the Scriptures*’ – refers to a number of key elements in Old Testament history and prophesy including:

When Abraham offered up a ram for a burnt offering in place of his only son Isaac (as a symbolic substitutionary atonement), according to the will of the Lord who had tested him. (Gen 22:13)

The ‘sacramental’ substitutionary atonement of the Passover lamb, **“***Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old…. the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it*” (Ex 12:5-7)

The symbolic substitution of a goat for the people of Israel on the Day of Atonement: **“***And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD and use it as a sin offering, but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel*” (Lev 16.9-10)

The prophesy of Isaiah about the suffering Messiah who would come for His people:

53v4 *Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows*

53v5 *He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities*

53v6 *The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed*

53v8 *stricken for the transgression of my people*

53v12 *he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors.*

The words of Christ Himself at the institution of Lord’s Supper Jesus said, ‘*this is my body which is* ***for you***’ (1 Cor 11:24)

1. Secondly, the **physical death** of Christ “*He was buried*”. Matt 27:50-51 *And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split.*

Jesus, the God-man, died. His body was separated from His soul. He did not merely swoon, faint and fall unconscious; only to be revived later. His death was confirmed by a soldier who saw that Jesus was no longer alive, pieced his side and immediately blood and water came out (John 19:34). His death was confirmed by the Pharisees who urged Pilate to secure the grave which they knew contained the dead body of Jesus. His death was confirmed by women who had witnessed Christ’s crucifixion and burial, purchased aromatic oils to anoint body of Jesus, they saw burial and the closing of the tomb (Mark 15:47)

1. **Thirdly**, the **bodily resurrection** of Christ ‘*he was raised on the third day*’. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the very heart of the gospel. The sermons of Apostles Peter and Paul in the book of Acts demonstrate the foundational importance of Christ being raised from the dead. Yet, some in the Corinthian church did not believe that a physical resurrection of a dead body could occur.

This was not an uncommon view in the 1st century e.g.

* The Sadducees taught that there is no resurrection (Matt 22:23; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8).
* The false teachers Hymenaeus and Philetus were saying that the resurrection had already happened and thereby upset the faith of some (2 Tim 2:18).
* The Nicolaitans (Rev 2:6) taught that the spirit passed from death to new life, but that the body, being essentially evil is not raised from the dead.

To counter these teachings, which attack the heart of the gospel, Paul writes in v16 *“For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised”*. The logic is straightforward: If dead bodies cannot come back to life, then Christ’s body could not have done so. The consequence for Christians is then severe: v17-19 *“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied”.*

* Having faith in Christ is pointless if He has not conquered sin.
* Those who have had faith in Christ and have died will no longer live.
* If our hope is in a risen Christ who has not risen from the dead, then we are the most to be pitied.

In fact many do pity Christians for believing in something which they have never seen themselves – a dead body coming back to life. People pity Christians for believing a message (‘the word of the cross’) which to them is folly (1 Cor 1:18); a stupid, ridiculous myth that only unenlightened morons would believe in the modern age. However, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:25).

At the heart of the gospel are three key elements which seem foolish to an unbelieving world:

* The substitutionary atonement of Christ
* The physical death of Christ
* The bodily resurrection of Christ

But to us who are being saved, the word of the cross, the gospel, is the power of God (1 Cor 1:18) demonstrated through many different evidences, some of which we’ll see in our 2nd point:

1. **The evidences of the gospel**

You have likely heard me say before that ‘truth is a rare commodity in a fallen world’ where the work of Satan, the ‘father of lies’ abounds. Jesus said to Pontius Pilate "*You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world- to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice*." To which Pilate replied, “What is truth?” (John 18:37-38) Truth was standing right there in front of him. Jesus is truth (John 14:6) and his message – the gospel is true.

Someone might say “how can you know that the good news is true? There are a number of evidences of the substitutionary atonement, death and resurrection which are given in our text:

* The evidence of the Scriptures
* The evidence of eyewitness testimonies
* The evidence of changed motivations
* The evidence of changed behaviour

Let’s look at these in turn:

1. **Firstly** “In accordance with the Scriptures” – we’ve already seen how sacrifices in the OT point forward to the cross where “*Christ died for our sins*”, in addition to God’s provision of a substitute ram for Abraham’s son, the symbolic transfer of the sins of Israel to a goat on the day of atonement and the prophesies of Isaiah we see many details of Psalm 22 were fulfilled in the crucifixion of Christ;

* He was mocked, despised and rejected (Ps 22:7; Matt 27:39)
* His joints would have been dislocated on the cross.
* He strength ebbed away as he died an excruciatingly painful death.
* His hands and feet were pierced (Ps 22:16; John 19:37; 20:27) – this suffering is also prophesied by Zechariah (12:10).
* He would be stripped, and His garments divided, and lots cast to see who would have them (Ps 22:17-18; Matt 27:35).
* He would be forsaken by God (Ps 22:1; Matt 27:46).

Daniel prophesies of an ‘anointed one’ who would be ‘cut off’ (Dan 9:26). Paul also reminds the Corinthians that Christ was ‘*raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures’.* Job speaks prophetically of the physical presence of Christ at the end of this age and of resurrection to come for himself: **“***For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God*” (Job 19:25-26). David predicts the resurrection of Christ in Psalm 16:10 “*For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption*”. The prophet Jonah was in the belly of a great fish for three days and three nights (Jonah 1:17) an event which Christ referred to as ‘the sign of Jonah’ (Matt 16.4; Luke 11:29) and linked to his own death and resurrection saying: “*For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*” (Matt 12:40).

These evidences for the resurrection from a variety of Old Testament references are not so very obvious without the light of the New Testament. This explains somewhat why Christ’s disciples had difficulty understanding his predictions of his death and resurrection before He went to Calvary: e.g. "*The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise*." (Mark 9:31).

You cannot ‘prove’ the death and resurrection of Christ from the Old Testament Scriptures by taking people to meet the risen Jesus in the flesh on this earth today, but you can demonstrate that they do evidence the necessity of his suffering unto death and resurrection. This is precisely what the resurrected Jesus did on the road to Emmaus saying to two men who were walking there: “*Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself*” (Luke 24:26).

1. **Secondly**, as evidence of the resurrection of Christ, Paul lists some eyewitness testimonies of those who saw him after he had died and been raised to life: v5b-8 “*he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me*”

Luke writes in Acts 1:3: “*To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God*”. Many of those who saw with their own eyes, the resurrected Christ were still alive when Paul wrote these words, about 20 years after his death. These eyewitness accounts are very powerful evidence that He was raised from the dead on the third day.

1. **Thirdly**, personal transformation – the conversion of people. The bodily resurrection of Christ changed the disciples from a scattered, demoralised, frightened group of broken people into the foundation upon which the New Testament church was built. Any and every effort was made to discredit them. The chief priests even bribed the soldiers who had guarded the tomb to say that 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' (Matthew 28:13)

Yet so convinced were the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead that nobody could shut them up. They, with many others who believed on Christ, then and since, were willing to be beaten, thrown to lions, tortured, crucified, burned alive, stoned to death, sawn in two, and killed with the sword.

Paul himself, who had ‘persecuted the church of God’, was converted, by God’s grace, from being an antichrist to an apostle. His own personal transformation, together with that of the other disciples then and over the past 2000 years is powerful evidence of the gospel.

1. **Fourthly**, this transformation is a fundamentally a change of heart, but it results in visible works of active service. Paul writes “I worked harder than any of them” – a proud boast? No, a statement of truth which evidences the power of God’s grace in his life. What was the main work in which Paul laboured? It was ‘handing over‘ the gospel.

You and I are not called to exactly the same ministry as Paul. We are not called to be a human author of Scripture, not necessarily called to be beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, in great danger (2 Cor 11:25-27) or to plant churches. However we are all called to hand over the gospel which we have received. We could summarise our church mission statement: “*To make and equip disciples of Jesus, our Saviour, who joyfully serve and glorify God*” with the words “pass the parcel” not as in some children’s party game, but as the highest calling which we have all received from our Lord. The ‘parcel’ being the gospel which we have received and are to hand over to others.

When you speak of the gospel, remember the key, heart elements:

* The substitutionary atonement of Christ
* The physical death of Christ
* The bodily resurrection of Christ

And the evidences

* The evidence of the Scriptures
* The evidence of eyewitness testimonies
* The evidence of changed motivations – including your own!
* The evidence of changed behaviour – including your own!

Let’s not forget to ‘pass the parcel’ this Easter and continue to deliver to others, as of first importance, what we, by God’s grace, have received.

AMEN