

Title: Remembering the Gospel
Text: 1 Corinthians 15:1-4
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A little girl called Nancy was in her backyard garden filling in a hole when her neighbor peered over the fence. Interested in what she was up to, he politely asked, "What are you up to there, Nancy?"

"My goldfish died," replied Nancy tearfully, without looking up, "and I've just buried him."

The neighbor was concerned and perplexed, "That's an awfully big hole for a goldfish, isn't it?"

Nancy patted down the last heap of earth and then replied, "That's because he's inside your cat."

I love that joke. It's timeless. It has two themes common to a great joke; cats and death.

We have a morbid fascination with death. Try as we might to hold it at bay with our pills and our procedures, death claims us all. As my good friend Graham Humphris says, the death rate still hovers somewhere around 100%.

Attempting to deal with the awful reality of death, we will often respond in one of three ways; fear it, joke about it, or avoid talking or thinking about it all together.

In one of my favourite observations about death, Woody Allen once said:

I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens.
(Woody Allen)

Christmas is just around the corner and some of you have people who it's almost impossible to buy for. Of course you can always buy a present from our Acts 1:8 Christmas tree, which will be out next week. Another option might be to order this, which will be available in April next year.

This is a Tikka Watch – a watch that counts down the years, months, days, hours and seconds you have left to live. Invented by a Swedish man, it collates a person's medical, family and lifestyle data and calculates their life expectancy. How would you like to look down at your wrist and be told how long you have to live?

Again, let me quote Woody Allen:

Life is full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it's all over much too quickly.
(Woody Allen)

Here is the thing; Christians need not fear death, nor avoid talk of it. Rather, every week we gather and celebrate and place our trust in the Death that leads to life.

The central symbol of our faith is a Cross, a barbaric instrument of torture and death.

The central story of the New Testament – the story into which, and from which all stories flow - is events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus. The gospel writers give fully one third of the books that bear their name to the week surrounding the Passion of Jesus. The rest of the New Testament is devoted to interpreting and practically applying what the empty cross and empty grave achieved.

The central sacraments of our faith, baptism and communion, both of which we celebrate today, are re-enactments of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In going into the waters of baptism we signify that we die with Christ, in coming up out of the water – we celebrate that his resurrection is our resurrection.

In the words that instituted communion as the church's sacred meal, the Apostle Paul declared this:

Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim (announce, declare, broadcast, promulgate) the Lord's death until he comes.

(1 Corinthians 11:26)

Christians don't avoid talk of death; we proclaim and celebrate and boast in a Death that leads to life.

This morning I want to allow the Apostle Paul to remind us why Jesus' death matters, and why we must celebrate it every single time we gather. To do that we are going to read a few verses from his first letter to the church in Corinth:

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.

(1 Corinthians 15:1)

Paul feels the need to remind the Corinthians of the substance of the gospel. For a whole bunch of reasons the church in Corinth had drifted from the heart of the gospel. It was Paul's preaching that had first captured their hearts; it was their response to that message that had led to the formation of their community. Paul is about to remind them of the central theme and story of that message and urge them back to it.

When we gather as church on Sunday or small group during the week, we are not simply engaging in a nice social gathering – a nice time to while away a couple of hours with some pleasant people. When we gather as church, amongst other things we are gathering in a radical act of remembering. With our gathering we are engaging in a revolutionary act of public witness. With our attendance we are saying to our friends and neighbors that the story of Christ crucified and risen is the only story that matters – far more than the other stories we could honor on a Sunday morning, like consumerism, or materialism or hedonism.

Do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

(Hebrews 10:25)

Paul goes on to say:

By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

(1 Corinthians 15:2)

Paul makes this 'all or nothing' claim; the gospel he preached to the Corinthians is the basis for their eternal salvation. If what he has preached is wrong in any way, their faith has no foundation.

We live in a 'you have your truth, I have my truth world.' Truth is not a multiple choice test where every answer is right. Truth is not a subjective choice, but an objective reality. Truth matters; truth has eternal consequences.

The strength and passion of my belief does not matter as much as the accuracy and truth of that belief. Let me illustrate. Over here we have our wonderful new baptistery. Our contractors have constructed a strong, wooden cover that we place over the top when we aren't using the baptistery. Now I believe the design and construction of the cover is strong enough to hold my weight. But for all I know, the contractors could have cut corners or there may have used inferior materials. It is only when I stand on the cover that I found out whether my belief has any substance. You see it doesn't matter how strongly or passionately I believe something; what matters is whether it is true and right.

This all begs the question, from a spiritual perspective, how do we know the truth? The Apostle John said that Jesus was full of grace and truth. In one of his claims that outraged his contemporaries and still outrages today, Jesus said:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

(John 14:6)

Jesus makes this radical claim; you can know an experience truth through me. In fact, all other truth is partial at best. And here is where, based on the evidence, we all need to make decision. Is Jesus telling the truth when he says, 'I am the way, the truth and the life...?'

You can't sit on the fence on this one. Paraphrasing CS Lewis, Jesus one of three things; he was either a liar, a lunatic – or who he and others said he was and is, the Lord. Liar, lunatic or Lord – who do you believe he is?

A man once said to his pastor that he would be happy to believe Christianity if the pastor could give him a watertight argument for its truth. The pastor replied, 'What if God hasn't given us a watertight argument, but rather a watertight person?'

Let's read on as Paul gets to the substance and foundations of the gospel.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...

(1 Corinthians 15:3)

Jesus' death on the cross was heroic – he never protested his fate. It was tragic; he never deserved his fate. But his death was more than tragic and heroic; it was sacrificial. And it wasn't sacrificial in a general sense, but in a very specific way. You see, Jesus death on the cross was a sacrifice made for you and me – for us.

Paul teaches that Christ died for our sins. What does that mean?

The timing of Jesus' death was no accident. Jesus was betrayed and arrested on the night of Passover, when the Jews remembered and celebrated their miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt centuries before. On that night, the wrath of God visited every Egyptian home and took the life of every first born son. God told the Jews to sprinkle the blood of a blemish free lamb on the door posts of their homes so that the angel of death would know not to visit there that night. And so on the night of the original Passover, death 'passed over' the homes of the Jews because the blood of an innocent lamb covered them. The blood of a lamb was the substitute for the blood of their first born sons.

Earlier in Corinthians, Paul says:

Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

(1 Corinthians 5:7)

When Paul says 'Jesus died for our sin', it means that Jesus died in our place- that he died the death we deserved because of our sins. It means that his death was substitutionary sacrifice. In this way he fulfilled the claim of John the Baptist, who when he saw Jesus walking towards him, said 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.'

Because Jesus, the perfect lamb, shed his blood, the wrath of God which burns again sin passes over us -should we place our trust in Jesus and the sacrifice he makes.

Some of might be thinking that this applies to others – that you are someone who on balance does more good than bad. But how good is good enough, and how bad is too bad? The bible teaches that all have sinned – every one of us. More than that, it teaches that just one sin is enough to separate us from a holy God. In short, we need a saviour, and Jesus is the perfect sacrifice who substitutes himself for us – his life for our life. John Stott puts it this way:

The essence of sin is we human beings substituting ourselves for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. We put ourselves where only God deserves to be; God puts himself where we deserve to be.

(John Stott)

Let's read the last two verses:

...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.
(1 Corinthians 15:4-5)

At the heart of the gospel message is the death and resurrection of Jesus. You cannot, as some have tried, separate the two.

The resurrection is nonsensical without Jesus death, and Jesus' death is robbed of its power without the resurrection.

Even in the first century there were those who tried to discount the resurrection. But for Paul and the early Christians, the resurrection of Jesus was central to the Christian gospel:

If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.
(1 Corinthians 15: 14 and 17)

Paul respond to the sceptics by pointing out that Jesus was raised from the dead as the scriptures predicted. He also takes the time to list the eyewitnesses to the resurrection – around 500 in all. For Paul and the early church, the resurrection of Jesus was an historical fact was that was the exclamation mark on the claim that Jesus was the Messiah. The explosive growth of the early church testified to the ongoing power of the resurrection. Nicky Gumbel puts it this way:

The resurrection of Jesus is rooted in history, grounded in scripture and confirmed in experience.
(Nicky Gumbel)

The central message of the gospel out of which everything else flows is the death and resurrection of Jesus. And so as God's church we will continue to proclaim, announce, broadcast and promulgate the Lord's death until he comes. This death is not merely heroic or tragic, but sacrificial and substitutionary. It is a death vindicated by the resurrection. It is a death that some is foolishness, and for others a stumbling block – but for those of us who are being saved, it is the power of God and the wisdom of God. The last word belongs to Paul:

(God) forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.
(Colossians 2:14-15)