

“BACK TO BASICS”
1 Corinthians 15:1-11

For some of you here this morning, this may seem pretty bizarre. What on earth is going on here? Why is this happening? What’s it all about? Well, we heard a little bit earlier on about what baptism means and we’ve heard from these four women what it all means in their own experience. In the words we used in little Leila’s dedication, there were also hints as to what we’re into here this morning. I suppose what it all boils down to in the end is that there is a desire to follow Jesus Christ, to be Christ-ians.

Fair enough – but that raises another set of questions, the most prominent of which is probably to do with what Christianity is actually all about. After all, Christians come in all shapes and sizes and seem to embrace a whole spectrum of different views about things. Very often, the ones who are wheeled out by the media to talk about their Christian beliefs in the newspapers or on television are the ones with a particular axe to grind, with a particular set of beliefs which may well be fairly extreme. What are the core values, the central beliefs of Christianity? What are these people here signing up to?

Tom Wright used to be the Dean here at Lichfield Cathedral and is now the Bishop of Durham. He’s a very articulate apologist for Christianity and this is what he wrote in a book about this letter of St Paul, from which we’ve just read:

*“Christianity, you see, isn’t a set of ideas. It isn’t a path of spirituality. It isn’t a rule of life. It isn’t a political agenda. It **includes**, and indeed gives energy to, all those things; but at its very heart it is something different. It is good news about an event which has happened in the world, and event because of which the world can never be the same again. And those who believe it, and live by it, will (thank God!) never be the same again either.”*

Christianity is “good news”. It is “gospel” – that’s what it means, based on a couple of Old English words. These women are wanting to declare their belief in and their transformation by that gospel, by that good news. It has made a difference to them. And in the words we have just read, Paul gives us a summary of the basics of the gospel. So this might help those of you who aren’t too sure what it’s all about to see what is at the heart of all this today. And for those of you who would already call yourselves Christians, it can serve as the “reminder” that Paul intended it to be.

You see, whatever the agenda of pressure groups within and beyond Christianity, whatever the impression we get from listening to news reports and reading polemical books about it, the heart of the Christian gospel is nothing to do with gay bishops, divorce laws, creationism or any of those issues – important as they are. It’s to do with Jesus the Christ, the Messiah – the things that he did and the things that were done to him and the impact they had on the world. Paul is here passing on a tradition, a set of beliefs that were relatively new. He’s writing this within twenty years of Jesus’ life and death, so there hasn’t really been time for it to have become distorted or mythologised. This what the basics of Christianity have been from the very beginning. And, as Paul says here, with his characteristic bluntness, any other belief is a waste of time, really (v2b). See what you think.

CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS

There is no doubt that Jesus lived on earth around the time of Augustus Caesar. You’ll have to look very hard to find anyone who can put forward a halfway credible argument that he did not exist. And if he lived, there is no doubt that he died, too. History tells us that he was crucified, executed by the Romans in an unholy alliance with the leaders of the people of first century Palestine. The crucial question is to do with the significance of that death. Why was he executed?

Well, the basic Christian belief is that he “died for our sins”. You see, since the time of the first human beings, humanity has been dogged by the consequences of wrong choices and wrong decisions. A world that had been essentially good when God put it together had been scarred by evil and its effects. Right at

the beginning God had promised to deal with evil and threatened to wipe out anything affected by it. That came to be human beings – something which God regretted. So instead of humanity having to bear the eternal consequences of those wrong choices, those hot-headed decisions, those demonstrations of selfishness and rebellion, God decided to deal with it himself. Jesus, his son, a part of his own being, was allowed to die “*for our sins*”, to take on himself the things that we should have undergone.

The mention that Paul makes here of **burial** is to emphasise, should we need it, the fact that he did actually die, that his life ended – and with it, the power that evil holds over humanity. Once Jesus had taken those consequences on himself, we no longer had to – if, of course, we believe in it. Not only can we face the eternal future with a sense of peace and a lack of anxiety, but we can also make the decision here and now to follow God’s way and start making the right choices when temptation comes our way.

HE WAS RAISED ON THE THIRD DAY

But the good news doesn’t end there. There’s more. Jesus died and was buried – but he was also brought back to life. Something very special was going on here. The fact that Jesus came back to life demonstrated that God was involved in all this: this wasn’t the ordinary death of an ordinary man. And it also validated what Jesus himself had said in his teachings. You see, if Jesus was right about this seemingly impossible event, then he was right about everything else as well. He is the Son of God. He is able to forgive our sins. He can make a real and lasting difference in our lives and in our world. And, having broken the power of evil when he died, he has also broken the power of death. We no longer need to fear what will happen to us at the end of this life.

And notice – just as Paul included the mention of burial to emphasise the reality of Jesus’ death, he now mentions that Jesus appeared to various people after his death in order to emphasise the reality of his resurrection. Remember that these words were written within twenty years of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Most of the people Paul refers to here would still be alive. Anyone who wanted could check out the story and corroborate what Paul was saying. It was true – bizarre as it might seem! Jesus was – Jesus **is** – alive! He is alive and still making a difference as he has been for two millennia.

ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES

And notice, too, that Paul mentions twice that all this happened “*according to the Scriptures*”. Now that doesn’t mean our New Testament: it means the writings of the Jewish people, which is pretty well our Old Testament. What Paul is eager to point out is that this was all part of God’s plan. If you’d read the Old Testament, then you’d have seen hints that this was coming – in fact, it was more than just hints, it was, with hindsight, as clear as anything. It’s all to do with the grace of God, with God’s amazing love for humanity and his overwhelming desire to enable them to enjoy the very best of life here and now as well as having an eternal future with him to look forward to. God had it all planned out from the moment he realised things were going to go wrong in this world.

And the most wonderful thing about that plan is that he included these four women in it. And that’s what they’re acknowledging today. They are saying that they believe in what Jesus has done. They are witnessing that they have, as Paul puts it, “*been saved by this gospel*”. Their lives have been transformed. And they believe that Jesus’ transforming work continues. And, believe it or not, God has included you in that plan too. These four lives have been transformed. How about you? If you think you might want to find out a bit more about this, then have a word with me or Liz over coffee. We’ve got a discussion group planned here that might be just the thing for you. But if you’ve been thinking about it before and you actually want to do something about it this morning, to say that you do actually believe it and you’d like to acknowledge that, then please speak to one of us afterwards.

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What is baptism all about? – a desire to follow Jesus Christ, to be Christ-ians. But what does that mean? After all, Christians come in all shapes and sizes and seem to embrace a whole spectrum of different views about things. What are the core values, the central beliefs of Christianity?

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ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES

Paul mentions twice that all this happened "according to the Scriptures", our Old Testament. This was all part of God's plan. God had it all planned out from the moment he realised things were going to go wrong in this world. And the most wonderful thing about that plan is that he included us in it.

Questions for discussion

1. What would you say are the core beliefs of Christianity?
2. Why is it "good news"?
3. "Sin" is not a fashionable concept today. How would you explain what it is without actually using the word?
4. Why did Jesus have to die?
5. What difference does the resurrection make? How can we try to show that it really did happen?
6. What are the most common objections to the gospel that you encounter today? How can we counter those objections?