

I am what I am

There seemed to be no end to the problems and challenges facing the apostle Paul as he contemplated the church at Corinth: a church set in a thriving cosmopolitan seaport, one that he himself had founded. In recent weeks we have considered things that were going wrong in the church community: old, familiar patterns of behaviour that had been eradicated by the Gospel were reappearing. Conflicts had broken out and now, as we approach the end of this letter to the church from Paul, we learn of one other issue. It seems that the church was very mixed-up and confused about the resurrection: Christ's resurrection, our resurrection, what happens beyond the grave. Evidently the Corinthians had a hard time believing in a physical resurrection – that Christ had been raised in the body and that we shall be raised similarly.

Well, this chapter 15 of Paul's letter to the church deals at some length with the topic and we are going to look at it in the next couple of weeks. Paul, however, begins the chapter by talking a great deal about himself. The word 'I' and 'me' appear frequently in these first 11 verses of this chapter. Yes, Paul affirms that Christ was raised from the grave but his stress is that Christ appeared to him, Paul – referring no doubt to the experience on the Damascus Road when the risen Lord had encountered him, even as he was on his way to persecute Christians. As the chapter goes on Paul will focus more on the resurrection itself but here in these opening verses he is basically commending himself to the Corinthians – and that's partly because on top of everything else some in the Church at Corinth were evidently questioning Paul's authority, attacking his credibility. So I want this morning to focus less on the resurrection and more on what Paul says about himself. And there is one phrase above all that stands out in these verses, one phrase that hit me. It comes in verse 10 where Paul, after recalling how he once persecuted the church of Christ, declares, 'But by the grace of God I am what I am.' It's a wonderful phrase. There is a tremendous self-confidence about it - yet it is fused with humility: 'by the grace of God I am what I am.' Paul, after all, had cause to feel somewhat insecure about himself. Not only was he being attacked in this church by people who were questioning him, but as he acknowledged here, he had reason to feel guilty about his past: he had persecuted the Church! He had

taken responsibility for the death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. How did he live with himself? Yet despite all that negativity he could say, ‘by the grace of God I am what I am.’ In other words, ‘by the grace of God I am peace with myself!’ There is a serenity here that defies the odds. And that got me thinking about what Paul says here about his life: about the things that enriched it, the things that give it meaning, the things that enabled him to be content and serene. And I want to consider these because I think we may find here secrets for our own lives.

The first thing that we note about Paul is that he stood in a tradition. So he says in verse 3, ‘For I handed on to you as of first importance *what I had in turn received.*’ And the tradition that Paul had received was the basic Christian Gospel: as he puts it, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures...’ In other words Paul is a recipient of a tradition that has been passed on to him, that he has received, and that he lives by and that gives his life meaning and significance and purpose. And note that this tradition that Paul has received comes in the form of a story, about certain things that happened: ‘Christ died for our sins... he was buried... he rose on the third day...’ So what we receive in the Christian faith, what is handed on to us, is essentially a story and this is significant. You see, the ancient world of Paul’s day was stacked with all kinds of philosophies which purported to explain life. The ancient world was philosophically spoiled for choice: Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Gnosticism – you name it. And each gave a view of the world and how life is to be lived. But Christianity comes to us not as a philosophy but as a story, and account of things that happened and what they mean. We receive not a philosophy but a narrative. And of course the story Christianity tells is part of a much bigger story about Israel and its faith – a story in fact that goes right back to the creation of the world. So Paul recognises that the story of Jesus is part of that much bigger story: ‘he died *according to the Scriptures...* he rose *according to the Scriptures* – in other words Christ’s story fit in with the bigger story the Scriptures tell. And there is something about human beings that relates to stories. Why is it that one indelible memory that I have of my children when they were young is the refrain, ‘tell us a story.’ And the church is the place where we receive this story and, as Paul did, we meet the risen Christ in the story and we become part of it. And you can make the faith very complicated with all sorts of sophisticated

theology and doctrine but at its heart it is a story to be told and received by one generation from another. So I love that part of the Communion service when, as we approach the table, we stand and recite what we call the Apostles' Creed: 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth...' etc. Here are the bare bones of the story that roots us in the past, that anchors us in a long history, linking us to people who for centuries have recited those words. And that gives our lives weight and meaning and identity. And receiving that story helps me to say with Paul, 'by the grace of God I am what I am!'

Try this for a moment. One feature of our modern world is our tendency to define ourselves over against the past. That's a habit that goes back to what we call the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries which rejoiced in breaking with the past and with traditions, often with good reason. So the year of the French Revolution was designated Year 1 because it was, supposedly, the beginning of a new world, a line drawn in the sand. And that mentality persists such that we now live in an era which delights in describing itself with the prefix '-post'. We describe ourselves as 'post-modern', and 'post-Christian', and 'post-industrial', and 'post-colonial', and 'post-structuralist' and all these high-falutin terms which are all telling is that we are in a new era, beyond the past. The danger though is that we become disconnected, uprooted, listless and what is lost is a sense of meaning and of who we are – unlike Paul: 'For I handed on to you... what I in turn had received...' and from which, by the grace of God, I am who I am.

So Paul received – and so too did the Corinthians. The next thing which we can deal with more quickly: Paul reminds the Corinthians in verse 1 of our passage of the good news he proclaimed to them – 'which you in turn received, in which also you stand.' And that is such a powerful image: the Gospel as a place to stand. In all the flux and turmoil of the world here is *terra firma*, firm ground. There is a great moment towards the end of the book of Acts when Paul is on trial for his life before the Jewish King Herod Agrippa. And at the end of his defence he declares, 'I stand here, testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place: that the Messiah must suffer...' and so on. There is Paul taking his stand on this ancient tradition, this ancient narrative, grounded in Moses and the prophets and now finding fulfilment in this suffering and rising Messiah. Here is another key to Paul's confident 'I am who I am!' I have a place to stand!

A couple of famous quotes come to mind. There was the great Greek mathematician and physicist Archimedes who famously said, ‘give me a place to stand and I will move the earth’, and he was talking about the principle of leverage: that with a long enough lever and a firm place to stand he could move the world. And in a sense that is an image of Paul: he took his stand on the gospel that he had received – and he moved the world. Or there is the great reformer Martin Luther, challenging the world of his day and on trial for his life. And against the storm of accusations and charges assail him Luther concludes his defence with the words: ‘here I stand, I can do no other..’.

‘Where do you stand?’ That is one of the most probing questions you can be asked. And I would suggest that our preoccupation with materialism, with consumption, the way we numb our lives with entertainment and the quest for pleasure and excess and for amusing ourselves deflects us from that incisive question, ‘where, in all this, do you stand? Where do you take a stand that makes sense of the world and gives your life meaning?’ Without that we cannot move the world; and without it we cannot say with Paul’s assurance, ‘I am what I am.’

One last point which we can deal with very briefly. Paul received the tradition, he took his stand on it – and he passed it on. As he writes, ‘For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received...’ Paul sees the fulfilment of his life, the meaning of his life as the handing on of this story that he had received. As we grow older we perhaps wonder about our lives: what has made them worthwhile? What has given them meaning? What will endure? We may have passed on our DNA for better or worse; we may have achievements of which we are justifiably proud and which will be our memorial; we all leave our footprint on the earth somehow. For Paul, what endures is that he passed on what he has received of the Gospel, the tradition in which he stood. That, too, enabled him to say with confidence, as he contemplated his life, ‘by the grace of God I am what I am.’ May God grant that we may echo that in our lives. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
our maker, our saviour, our friend,
we praise your holy name.
We praise you for all that you have done:
for your creation of all things,
for the calling of your people Israel,
for your coming among us in Jesus of Nazareth,
who lived among us,
who died for our sins according to the Scriptures,
and who was buried and who was raised
on the third day according to the Scriptures.
We praise you for this story of your love and grace
and for your invitation to us
to become part of that story.
O God forgive us for the sins for which Christ died.
Forgive us for our failure to live the new life
that you offer us with the risen Christ.
Forgive us for our failure to proclaim Christ's
resurrection with our lives.
Help us, we pray, to live the good news we have received.
Come to us in forgiveness and grace
and raise us up by the power of your Holy Spirit.
We pray these things in Jesus' name and in his words
we join together and say...