

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 May 2007

Preacher: Norman Maciver

[0 : 00] Can I say that I'm delighted to be back again in this pulpit. Some years ago I was invited by your then minister, Alec MacDonald, to be your guest preacher here.

And I remember finding that to be a great blessing. But my first experience in this pulpit takes me back. Indeed, back beyond your time here as a congregation.

Back 31 years ago this very spring. At that time I was a final year student for the ministry of the Church of Scotland.

And I was seeking God's will for my life and future ministry. The congregation of New Hills on the outskirts of Aberdeen had expressed an interest in me becoming their new minister after the translation of the Reverend David Serrell to Larbert.

Now the process in the Church of Scotland is maybe unknown to some of you. But a representation from what was then called a vacancy committee had heard me in Glasgow and were keen that the whole vacancy committee of some 20 people might hear me nearer to their own home in New Hills.

[1 : 24] And so it was agreed that I would lead worship here in what was then Bon Accord St. Paul's Church of Scotland and that the whole vacancy committee would be present to make their assessment of me.

I have to say it was a somewhat unnerving experience. Not least because of the attitude of the then incumbent of Bon Accord St. Paul's.

He was at that time about to go back to the central belt. And I have to say, for me, a young enthusiastic student, he displayed some somewhat discordant attitudes.

First of all, when I met him, he declared that I was really wasting my time pursuing the call to New Hills. They had heard someone else in this very same pulpit a week earlier, and he was unquestionably their preferred definitive choice.

Not the most encouraging prequel to one of the most important services of my life. And then, having introduced me to the congregation, he promptly left the building and went home.

[2 : 43] And he was the minister of the congregation. Well, in the event, I was called and spent 30 happy and remarkable years as the minister of New Hills until, as I said earlier, my retirement last September.

So here I am, back in this same pulpit. But the name of the denomination outside the door has radically changed.

So, why on earth am I back here? Because Fergus MacDonald, your interim moderator, couldn't find a minister of your own denomination to lead you in worship?

Well, I truly hope not. The truth is, of course, that I'm a good long-standing friend of Fergus through his work in the Bible Society, and then in the Lausanne movement.

For some years, I was a board member of the Scottish Bible Society, and a member of the Lausanne International Committee. But then I do have a few further credentials to be here today.

[3 : 53] I'm a Joasoch. My roots are in Lewis, both parents born there. With all that that means in terms of free church connections, I know your culture and your ethos very well indeed.

Then a first cousin of mine is a former moderator of your General Assembly, the Reverend Donald MacDonald, who was minister in Carloway, where for five years I spent some of my early life.

I suppose what I'm really trying to say, by way of introduction, is that I feel very much at home amongst you. Both in terms of the building and the denomination.

And so I'm extremely grateful for the invitation to be back with you. This morning, if anyone had asked me what I was going to be preaching about, what was to be the theme of my sermon, I would have simply said to them that my sermon title would be The Clear Gospel.

The Clear Gospel. The Clear Gospel, you might ask, in a free church congregation, renowned for preachers in this pulpit of that Clear Gospel.

[5 : 16] Well, I believe that we live in days of enormous challenge, wherever we stand in our nation in terms of denominational allegiance.

You see, we don't as Christians live in some kind of eternal vacuum. We live in the real world of Tony Blair's decision, whenever, and Alex Salmon's victory.

And it's a world, a country, a nation, that is facing a real challenge to the clear gospel. And so I believe the Lord has led me to this crucial theme from His Word for this morning.

Let me tell you a simple story. It's about an Australian who came home one day to find that his house had collapsed and very little remained to be seen but a pile of dust and rubble.

Unknown to him, white ants had been eating away at the foundations and the supporting timbers of his house for years.

[6 : 36] While everything had continued to look the same outside normal, inside the house was being gradually eaten away. Then one day it finally crashed to the ground, destroyed by these tiny insects.

It's a parable in a sense, but I want to suggest to you it's a parable of what is happening in our nation today. In many Western countries, not least in ours, an insidious destructive force is eating away at our Judeo-Christian heritage we might call it multiculturalism and we may see very little visible change at the moment.

But ideological Islam is eroding the foundations and the supports of Western society, its culture and its religion by a very gradual process of what we call Islamization.

Islamization. In 1981, over 25 years ago, the International Institute of Islamic Thought was established and was registered in the United States.

Now, it has three stated objectives. Objectives through the medium of publishing and the academic world. the first one is to provide a comprehensive Islamic outlook through clarifying the principles of Islam and relating them to relevant issues in contemporary thought.

[8 : 21] The second one, to regain the identity of the worldwide Muslim community through the Islamization of the humanities and the social sciences.

And thirdly, to give human civilization meaning and direction in line with the values and objectives of Islam.

It is what some have called the Islamization of knowledge. In this sense, facts are no longer true or false.

But their truthfulness depends on whether they fit with Islamic values or not. Now, 26 years later, the world is well on its way to being transformed.

When I became an ordained minister nearly 31 years ago, Islam was in no sense on my agenda. it now tops the public agenda across the globe.

[9 : 33] What are some of the things it affects in the United Kingdom? Well, we're told that Islam inspired the glorious architecture of our medieval churches and cathedrals.

We're told that William Shakespeare may have been a follower of Islamic mysticism. There is much more being claimed with the claim that Islam, and I quote, is the source of all that is good in your civilization.

So, why not become a Muslim? And you know, the secular media are beginning to disseminate Islamized knowledge. Recently, the respected National Geographic magazine has published a map of the Middle East on which a model is marked of the journey made by Abraham with Ishmael and Isaac to Mecca, where, says the magazine, he established the Hajj pilgrimage.

This is set out as established fact. And we recently had a prominent evangelical clergyman in England arguing that local churches should invite an imam to Sunday morning worship and give him the opportunity to present his beliefs about Islam and let the Christians ask him questions. This is what that clergyman says. I simply cannot think of a more impacting, prophetic, dynamic way of exposing believers to a major faith ideology of which most of us are entirely ignorant.

[11 : 41] The white ants are quietly eating away at the house. And please notice none of this has said anything about Islamic fundamentalist terrorism.

My friends, we need to know and believe the gospel. And we need that to be the clear gospel. I once had an Old Testament professor for whom the greatest regard and love, regrettably for me.

He had a somewhat limited expression of the fullness of the evangelical faith. And yet this I remember from his lectures. He spoke often about the gospel in the Old Testament.

And that's what we find in the psalm we read this morning. The clear gospel. Here we have a confession of faith in the Lord of Israel.

You are my Lord. Apart from you, I have no good thing. That's powerful. It's very profound and it's very Christian.

[12:52] He speaks of saints in the light of that proud profession of faith. And then he focuses very directly on what he really has really been the continuing challenge to the true faith as revealed in Christ.

The question of other gods. Defection from the worship and the service of the one through God. Verse 4. The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods.

You see, this is a crucial issue in the Old Testament. And that's one of the reasons I believe that the Lord Jesus Christ himself and indeed the early church so greatly emphasized the uniqueness of Jesus as the only begotten Son of God, the Father, in whom to believe is to have eternal life.

As the one in whose name to believe is to give the right to become children of God. As the one who proclaims himself to be the way, the truth, and the life.

The only one through whom we can come to the Father as the one of whom the New Testament church declares, salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven whereby we must be saved.

[14:19] And it's against the back cloth of that that I believe in our day and generation in this nation so blessed by the heritage of the gospel that yes, even those of us mature in the biblical, evangelical faith need to be recalled to and reminded of the clear gospel.

Because this is the only true antidote to the sickness of our age. It is true, I believe, that we live in what I'd call a practical age.

We face so many real issues, and these issues are disseminated through the media into all our homes and lives. The challenges of climate change and devastation of HIV AIDS and the evil of murderous poverty.

That many Christians in good faith are tempted to think that how we act as Christians is really the crucial thing.

And so what we believe, what the church has traditionally called doctrine, is of some kind of limited secondary importance. My friends, that's a lie of the devil.

[15:40] And we must face up to it, and we must deal with it. For St. Paul, doctrine, what we believe, is absolutely vital. Now the Corinthian church was not, to say the least, the ideal church.

If 31 years ago I had been preaching here for the New Hills vacancy, and then heard the congregation described to me in terms of the Corinthian model, I have a strange feeling that the voice of a calling God could have been more pleasantly and persuasively heard to another congregation.

And Paul, I've been dealing with many issues. And please don't forget that he was writing to the church. The church. In chapter 1 and verse 2 he writes, to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, together with those everywhere who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he goes on to speak of divisions in the church. sexual behavior immorality, believers taking each other to the civil courts, marriage, idolatry, drunkards at the Lord's table, and then the central issue of worship and the use of spiritual gifts.

It's some comprehensive list and yet as he comes to the end of his letter, he focuses on the clear gospel, because this is what the real solution to all the problems is.

[17:32] And so in the heart of this early Christian church beset by so many real practical issues, Paul points them to what they have to believe, to what motivates them to behave according to the discipline of Jesus Christ.

And it's the real gospel, it's a clear gospel. First of all, he points them to the priority of the gospel. As I said, these things that Paul has been writing about, responding to, have been pretty scary, pretty formidable things.

And yet the great apostle wants to say that the real solution to all these problems is to go back to the gospel. not as a source of wisdom or teaching or advice or encouragement amongst other things, but as a priority.

Of course, many things are important in life or in a nation. In the current political climate, it's important who are those appointed to be in authority over us.

Those given the responsibility to be ministers of state. But in Westminster, we recognize we have a prime minister. In Holyrood, we have a first minister, whoever he turns out to be, and whatever you like, whether you like him or not.

[19:00] And even in Ireland, we have what's called in Irish the Toshiach. The Scottish Gaelic equivalent is Toshiach. First, head, primary. And so it is with the gospel.

Paul, as I suggested, has been dealing with many important issues facing the developing Corinthian church. But now he says, I'm speaking here of the gospel as of first importance. First importance. I'm speaking about something that is primary. I'm speaking about the priority of the gospel. You want to know how to behave in the church of Jesus Christ?

Well, then get back to what you believe. about Jesus Christ. You see, Paul wants to root his solution to the issues facing the church.

The issues we call today multiculturalism or sexuality, denominational disunity. He wants to root his answer in the clear gospel, the priority of the gospel.

[20:06] I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel, not another one, by this gospel, you are saved.

Not some other gospel, but this gospel. And my friends, we need, in the face of the challenge of our age, the real practical issues that threaten our nation and our peoples, to listen again to the reminder of the apostle, and be pointed back to the priority of the gospel, the clear gospel.

And secondly, that brings me to the content of the gospel. You see, it begs the question, what is the real gospel? As you know, I spent my life ministering in and in leadership of the Church of Scotland. Scotland. And for much of my ministry, I was involved in the recruitment and selection of candidates for the ministry of word and sacrament.

And that involved pretty intense scrutiny of how applicants understood their call from God to ministry. It was a fascinating and for me a very demanding but rewarding area of my ministry.

[21:33] Latterly, I was the senior director for the denomination of the whole process. And one of the things I tried to impress on my assessors was the absolute need to test applicants on what they understood the gospel to be.

Now, I confess that it was at times difficult to get what I would call the clear gospel. I was part of what we call a mixed denomination. But I persisted and I did so on the basis of 1 Corinthians chapter 15 because here in biblical terms is the clear gospel.

Its content. The gospel is of course about how I live in the real world. But it's much more profoundly about what I believe and what is important to me.

about this man, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. For St. Paul, there is no equivocation. The gospel of salvation and therefore the gospel that informs our lifestyle is the person of Jesus Christ.

Who he is and what he's done. It is of first importance and so in verses 3 to 7 we get in telescopic focus the heart of why it was Jesus, the only Son of God, came to live on this earth.

[23:10] From the earliest days of human civilization, the people of God knew their need of a lasting divine solution to the selfish predicament.

And again and again in their holy writings, they look to the future for a Messiah. The whole of the Old Testament is clear witness to this.

And so the time arrives when the child of Bethlehem, the boy and man of Nazareth, sets his face to become the Savior of Jerusalem and the unequalled King of the universe.

And it's all there, says Paul, in the Scriptures. Jesus Christ died, not just his natural death, not just because he was sick or injured, but because he had a job to do.

Look at the Scriptures, says Paul. He had come to deal with our predicament. He died for our sins. Sin had to be dealt with and paid for.

[24:18] Indeed, it had to be eliminated and conquered. And to do this, the Son of God had to face the loneliness of death.

And he did it. This is central to the clear gospel. Jesus died for your sins and for mine.

Whether we believe it or not, whether we accept it or not, he did it. But there's more. The dead and buried preacher of Palestine was raised from the dead.

Few serious scholars today deny the fact that Jesus of Nazareth died. so much so that many of them are spending huge amounts of money and time trying to discover the tomb of the grave in

which lie his decaying bones.

And of course, we get many who claim to have found them. My friends, they're wasting their precious time. Yes, he was buried, but he was raised on the third day.

[25 : 38] They could very well find his tomb, but it's empty. Christ is risen. Listen again according to the scriptures.

Listen to just one of these scriptures. Therefore, says the psalmist, my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices. My body will also rest secure because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.

My friends, the followers of Islam would claim to know Jesus as a prophet, one only surpassed by Muhammad himself. But they will not allow the biblical facts of the clear gospel to be proclaimed about him.

And yet this is Jesus who was seen alive by hundreds at the same time after his tomb had been sealed securely shut again. This is the testimony of Paul and it's the content of the clear gospel. It's here and it's not complicated. It's about his and only his death and resurrection. And I suggest to you in this day of challenges truth and devotion we need to know and we need to express and live out of the reality of the clear gospel.

[27 : 06] And we should do so with no fear because thirdly St. Paul goes on to point out the security of the gospel. The security of the gospel. Yes, the doctrine what we believe is important but only because it leads us into the reality of life.

It's obvious from these words in verses 9 to 11 that St. Paul was not the most confident not the most self-assured man who has ever lived.

He knew that his earlier lifestyle had not earned him any bonus points in working his way to heaven.

I am the least of the apostles. I don't even deserve to be called an apostle.

I was an enemy of the church but but and here's the good news. Here's the security of the gospel by the grace of God.

By the grace of God. Oh yes, says Paul, I worked hard but it's still the gospel. The good news is still about the grace of God and there is no deviation from that.

[28 : 16] I suppose in some ways we live in what should be one of the most secure environments in history. We have access to health and to wealth and to pleasure.

So much more than any generation in history. And yet what's the reality of today? Our cities are full of car alarms, security access systems to our homes, CCTVs in our streets and transport.

In short, we're probably the most insecure generation in recent history. At the same time, there are so many who live with neither purpose nor destination.

Well, this morning I can tell you this, and I tell it without a conviction. On the basis of the Jesus of the Bible, you can have absolute security, but only in this gospel.

You see, it's not about your record in life, or your ancestry, or your ability or your qualifications. It's not about your religion or your ethnicity.

[29 : 26] It's about the grace of God. This is the security of the gospel, because the Bible tells me that this God loves you, and he sent his son Jesus to die for you, and to be raised from the dead.

This is the security of the real gospel, the clear gospel. the white ants are gnawing away, and you are the house.

There is an antidote, and it's the historic gospel of Jesus Christ. My friends, recognize the priority of the gospel. Believe and trust the content of the gospel, and discover afresh for yourself, and for our nation, the absolute security of the gospel, the clear gospel.

Come and receive the one who is the gospel, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let us pray. Amen. Gracious and loving Heavenly Father, we bless you this morning afresh that we have good news to proclaim and good news to live.

[30 : 54] That in the clear gospel that is centered solely in the person of your only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, we have that hope for all eternity, as we trust in Him, that we will live with Him.

And yet, our God, we recognize that that secure hope throws its glorious light across all of our life and work.

And so we come to you, our God, conscious of the world in which we live, that we might seek your face and seek your blessing and peace for this, your world, and your church.

we pray this morning for those places in our world that are troubled and insecure, where violence rules and death is that everyday experience in the streets.

Lord, we cry to you that the leaders of the nations would somehow discover that the only true peace is not in fact the absence of war, but the fullness, of the Lord Jesus Christ and his life living in us.
[32 : 10] Lord, we remember those who are troubled in any way, through illness, those who care for them in hospital and at home. We ask, our God, that by your holy will, those known to us and beloved by us would be raised up to health and strength.

we remember our God, the bereaved, and pray that you would fill them with the comfort and the hope of the gospel.

And we remember, Lord, those who will soon die, that in some way they might be visited by your spirit, that they would hear afresh the hope of glory and so come to trust in Jesus.

Lord, we pray for your church, that we would indeed seek to proclaim that gospel that is both simple and clear and attractive, that others may come to seek the Lord Jesus and to put their trust in him.

Thank you, our God, for your word. Continue with us in worship and service this day through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

[33 : 32] Amen.