

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11
"PASS IT ON!"

It is the 4x100m relay race at the Olympics; it is the final and the gold medal is at stake. The teams line up at the start; four people in each team and they have to get round the track in first place to win the gold medal. Some of the fastest men and women in the world are lining up against each other. Who will win? But this race is not always to the fastest, because the key to the relay is about getting the baton round; this 30cm long metal tube or wooden stick is the key to this race. The four runners have to pass this baton from one to the other without dropping it; drop it and you're out of the race, disqualified. They have to pass it to each other within certain yellow lines on the track; outside these lines and you're out of the race, disqualified. This race in the 2016 Olympics was won by Jamaica, with the US team disqualified; at the World championships in 2017 the race was won by the GB men, Usain Bolt pulled up injured! In the women's race GB won the silver medal for coming second!

A few months ago I was hearing the story of Kirkliston church's vision for the next few years; some of you might remember Maggie Lane when she did a placement here some years ago, training for ministry. In telling the story of their vision for the future, they used an image like the one on the screen, passing on the baton as the way of describing their priority plan; it is all about passing on the faith to other people, to people who have never heard it before, to people in the next generation who will take on responsibility for church, to pass on the faith to others so that they will believe it too. This is also an idea that we've been talking about in the Kirk Session in our thinking about mission – how do we pass on the baton to other people? How do we pass on the Christian faith to people who don't know it or don't yet believe in Jesus? What do we have that is worth passing on? Passing on is not giving away because we keep believing too!

Paul talks about this kind of process happening in Corinth: "*What I...*" (1 Corinthians 15:3) Paul received the gospel: he met Jesus on the road to Damascus; this was his conversion to being a Christian and to being a disciple of Jesus; what happened next is a bit of a blur, but we understand that he took himself off to his home town of Tarsus and studied, read his Bible, our Old Testament, probably heard the stories of Jesus and what God had done in Jesus, and began to piece it all together under the guidance of the Spirit; he received the gospel from God and it became his gospel; he believed it and he put his faith in Jesus. Then spent his life passing it on to other people in places like Corinth, telling people what God had done, challenging people to believe the good news. I'm grateful to people who told me about Jesus, who introduced me to stories of Jesus, my mother, others and I received it from them; then it became "mine" in the sense that I believed it for myself and then I have spent over 30 years trying to pass on these stories, trying to pass on this faith to you. Thank God for those people who introduced you to Jesus. The challenge for all of us today is this – to whom are we passing on these stories now?

What do we have to pass on? There is content to this gospel that we believe and pass on. This is not "believe-what-you-like-about-God!" Paul outlines four parts to the content of this message that he is passing on, and it all centres around Easter. "*For what...*" (1 Corinthians 15:3f) This is the heart of Christianity; this is "*of first importance*" according to Paul; this is what matters most about Christian faith, these are the things that we should believe most of all. It centres on Jesus; it centres on Easter! The whole New Testament is like that: read any of the four books we call the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and all of them spend more time telling us about the last week in Jesus' life than the other 3 years, proportionately; the events leading up to and including His death and resurrection are given far more space and air-time than any other part of His life. These are the most important things because these events are what make Jesus into a Saviour; it here that Jesus has done what it takes for God to save us, for us to be forgiven our sins and given hope. These events deserve attention from us and deserve to be passed on.

There are four pieces that all belong together:

“Christ died...” Jesus’ death was not a tragic accident, nor a waste of a young life; it was the reason why He came; He set His face to go to Jerusalem knowing that He would suffer and die; He said that “it was necessary” that He suffer and die because the cross was the place where He saved us; everything that stands between us and God, our faults, mistakes, the mess we make of life – all of that is taken away and we are forgiven, and it started at the cross. *“According...”* that’s the Old Testament; Paul discovered in the Old Testament that God has promised and planned this!

“He was buried” comes along with His death, I suppose, but is the proof that Jesus did die. In the days when people challenge the truth of resurrection, then and now, it is an important affirmation to say that Jesus was buried; He really did die!

“He was...” Again Paul found this to be promised in the Old Testament, but equally he knew the stories of the resurrection, Easter Sunday; he knew the eye-witness testimony of those who visited the tomb and found it empty and how they came to believe that Jesus is alive, raised from dead; it was not just the evidence of empty tomb, but...

“He appeared...” How long is this list of people who saw the risen Jesus; you can add them up if you like, and it comes to more than 530 people, depending. There are enough eye-witnesses to silence any critic who says “you made this all up; you imagined it; it was a hallucination; Jesus didn’t really die, He only fainted and revived in the cool of the tomb.” None of that stacks up! The tomb is empty and the only explanation that meets all the facts is that God raised Jesus.

This is the heart of what we stand for as the Christian church; this is the centre of our faith; this is the set of four events that make Jesus our Saviour. What does the church stand for? We are trying to build Christ’s church in the community but what do we stand for as we try to do that? Our Church logo has the cross at its centre, deliberately, because we are trying to bring the cross into the life of the community, to share the message of the cross with people, and pass on the message of the cross to others. It matters more than ever that we have a clear idea of what we stand for; we need to know, the community needs to know what we stand for, Otherwise how can others believe! We live in a world where people more and more don’t know these stories, don’t understand what Easter is about other than the Easter bunny. It matters that we know what we stand for and can pass on that good news to other people.

One more thing: *“Hold firmly...”* (1 Corinthians 15:2) in the background to passing on the faith is this notion that we “hold on, hold firmly” to this faith. That might be easier said than done for us, but that’s the challenge for us. Paul has received it; he has already told them about Jesus when he visited Corinth; now he is reminding them so that they hold firmly. All kinds of things get in the way of faith: fallings-out in the church at Corinth might be one; sins, faults and failures might be another; other teachers coming to tell them wrong things, pretending to be Christian, but with a subtly different message; or simply life is hard! Hold on! All of this is a celebration of God’s grace at work: Paul knows that he deserves nothing of this blessing from God, being aware of his failures, aware of his past – he has a past! Nevertheless, God has blessed him, loved him, saved him; grace is God’s love to people who don’t deserve it. The Gospel is not about us and how good we are; church is not a celebration of human achievement; the gospel is about how God has graced us and church is a celebration of the grace of God to save us in face of human frailty.

Jesus is walking along the lake-side in Galilee; the crowd of people is standing round, wanting to listen. He takes a boat and moves a little out from shore while the crowd stands on the beach and He teaches them. Then “Peter, put down your nets for a catch!” “We’ve spent all night and caught nothing, but OK.” Of course, Peter has his best catch of fish ever with Jesus.

What's Peter's first thought? His frailty: "Go away..." (*Luke 5:8*) but Jesus doesn't go away; Jesus calls Peter and others to become disciples, to follow Him and to pass on what they hear to others, to become fishers of men! This is what grace looks like, God's love to people who are not worthy. Jesus didn't go away from Peter, but loved him in spite of his frailty and called him. The whole gospel is about grace: our sins are forgiven but not because we deserve it; our sins are forgiven but not because there are other people worse than we are; our sins are but not forgiven because God is an easy tap. Our sins are forgiven because Jesus has died on the cross, was buried and is raised; our sins are forgiven because God has done this out of His grace.

How do we put this? "This is what Church stands for!"? "This is what we believe"? "This is my faith"? Do you see how each of these is different! Pass it on! That's the challenge we face. Do people know what the Church stands for? How will they know unless we tell them! Do people know the stories of Jesus? How will they know unless we tell them? Do people understand the values by which Jesus lived His life, the values that He teaches us? How will they know unless we live by these values and tell people what they mean? Pass the baton – to whom? To our children, grandchildren, family, to the people next door, the people we meet, to our friends, to others when the opportunity arises? Pass the baton; pass on the faith of Jesus!