

2 CORINTHIANS 3:7-18
THE GLORY OF THE GOSPEL

“If it’s old, it must be good!” Is that how you think? ‘The old ways are best ways; let’s go back to the old ways and the things we did before! The old ways are far better than the new ways; the old attitudes are best; the old ways in which people did things were better; if only we could get back to the old days things would be a lot better and so many of our problems would be solved, would disappear.’ It could be the church about which you say that; could be the community about which you say that; it could be Scotland. “If it’s old, it must be good!” I still have a record collection, a small one admittedly, but I still have some vinyl LPs; I decided to listen to one and then in my mind after the death recently of Gerry Rafferty, a Stealer’s Wheel LP that dates from the 1970’s; I would enjoy it because 35 years ago I enjoyed it. But you can’t turn the clock back; just because the LP is 35 years old is no guarantee that it is good and as I listened to it I was reminded that some songs I enjoyed and some I didn’t; I didn’t enjoy them then and didn’t particularly enjoy them now!

The Church has a problem. The message we have to share with others is old, 2000 years old, and for some people that is a huge barrier to belief. “How can that old message still have anything to say to my life in 2011?” So some people simply write it off on the basis that it’s old and will not give it a second look. Here’s the rub: there was a time when the same gospel was new, when it was a novelty in the world and there were people around then who said ‘this is new; we can’t stand anything new; we don’t want it!’ They only wanted the old, tried, trusted ways. Here’s the challenge for us today: to discover that questions of old and new don’t matter, but to see the real substance of the Christian gospel, what does it really mean? What does Jesus do for me? How can God bless my life because of Jesus and for faith? These are the real questions and the answer to these questions will shape our life and faith and who we are and what we are. This not about new and old, but about truth and substance!

What’s the best thing about you? What’s your best feature? It might be your nose or your hair, or your skin tone, or some other part of your anatomy. Some people think they have no best feature and spend a whole lot of time and money enhancing the way they look, to make their features better, bigger, smaller; that will make them feel better and give them a better quality of life; which is why we have cosmetic surgery industry; which is why Gordon Ramsay has been in news recently for his new hair! Let me suggest that the best thing about you is your Christian faith; or that the best and most life-enhancing thing we can find in life is Christian faith. Faith gives us a new sense of ourselves and being loved and accepted by God; it gives us a new sense of freedom, hope and peace; it doesn’t solve all problems of life overnight and forever, but faith gives us a reason to live, a reason to believe, a reason to hope.

All of this is at the heart of 2 Corinthians 3. Paul is confronted with a group of people who are saying ‘the old is best; let’s get back to basics; let’s run a back to Moses campaign’ and these people are threatening to take over the life of the Church in Corinth. Paul won’t let that happen and in this passage he compares the old and the new; he shows the Christians of Corinth where their life and their real freedom lie. It all centres on Jesus; the biggest honour, privilege and glory we have is our Christian faith. It is a glorious thing to be a Christian, yet we have managed to make it seem ordinary. It is a glorious privilege to worship God and yet at times we make it boring! Preaching gospel is the most glorious privilege any human being can have yet we appear ashamed to tell our friends what we believe and make it seem as if it just doesn’t matter. It should matter to us; it should be the best thing we ever have; it should be the thing about us that matters most.

Moses was the great leader of the Old Testament people of God in the days of the Exodus. He has been on Mount Sinai in the Egyptian desert and God has given him the 10 commandments. He has been in the presence of God and comes down the mountain to pass on to the people what he has been given. As he came down the mountain, they said that his face shone: "*his face...*" (Exodus 34:30) Something of the glory of God had rubbed off on Moses and he reflected something of that glory in his face; he had been in the presence of God and it shone out of him. So to keep the people happy "*When Moses...*" (Exodus 34:33) He covered his face with a veil to keep the glory hidden because it made the people nervous, frightened; God made the people nervous, frightened and so Moses had to hide the glory! He took the veil off when he went back into God's presence. The 10 commandments came with glory, a glory that meant Moses face being veiled and the people being afraid.

Paul plays around with that story to make sure that people understand what this 'back-to-Moses' campaign really means. The whole of our reading from 2 Corinthians 3 today is based on this story. The 10 commandments are brilliant as a way of life, but hopeless as a way of finding salvation, hope and freedom. What does the Old Testament law say? "Do this and you will live!" In fact, says Paul, all this old way of law does is bring death to our souls; all this message does is make us aware of our failures; all this does is drive us away from God in fear and despair because it is a constant reminder of how we have failed and what we can't do. This ministry, he says brings death, condemns men, was fading, was written on tablets of stone and every time, he says, people tell you "Do this and you will live" a veil is drawn over your face so that you can't see things clearly. The old ways, this 'back-to-Moses' campaign, are dead and bring despair and fear to people's hearts.

Any scheme of life that is based on me and my achievements is doomed to fail. Any attempt to build a relationship with God on the basis of what I can do is doomed to failure. There are two reasons for that: first of all, I can never do enough good to achieve perfection and glory; secondly, I keep making mistakes and these mistakes and failures cloud any achievements. The biggest problem of all, is that I'm trying to make myself the master of my own destiny and that, at its very heart, is an illusion; I cannot be and never will be the master of my own destiny. I may achieve good things and do a whole pile of good in world, but I will never win my salvation that way. I may achieve the heights of glory and be famous and celebrated for my achievements, but I will never win my salvation, peace and freedom that way.

"*If the...*" (2 Corinthians 3:7ff) Glory is a word that is all about light and brightness. In the Old Testament, people couldn't look on God because His glory was too bright, was too much for them; Moses' face reflected just a little of that glory of God; his face shone. 'Glory' came to mean something renowned, splendid, spectacular. Paul says 'if the old had glory attached to it, the new has even more glory because the gospel does far better things'. Our projectors shine brightly and show us images clearly on a morning like this; we admire their power and how well they shine; but as soon as the sun comes out and shines through the large window, the image can all but disappear; one brightness overwhelmed by another. Paul says the glory of the gospel in Jesus is far brighter, far stronger than any other so-called glory because He does better things. The gospel saves us; the gospel brings life to us; the gospel brings freedom; the gospel brings forgiveness (that should be first); the gospel brings hope; the gospel lasts forever. "*how much...*" (3:11)

If you go into Waterstone's (other bookshops are available!) and see whole shelves of books that are in the lifestyle section, they all have something to say about a philosophy of life, the way to live a successful, fulfilled life; the way to be a new

person, a whole person; the way to overcome fears and anxieties. I have to say, that all of them fade in comparison to the gospel; it is hugely controversial to say that in some circles, but only the Christian gospel takes the veil from our eyes to see life as it really is. “*Whenever ...*” (3:16) Paul’s whole testimony is that the Spirit of God gives life and more than that: “*Now the ...*” (3:17) As the gospel is preached, the Spirit of God is at work in our hearts and minds and is persuading us to believe this glorious message and as we believe this glorious message, the Spirit creates faith in our hearts. The heart of the gospel is forgiveness; God forgives our sin, our waywardness, our faults and failings and because there is forgiveness we have hope; we are not condemned, we need not be afraid of God and so we are free to be ourselves, free to live life to the full following Jesus. Only Jesus brings this glory and good news. This new covenant centres on Christ, brings all of these blessings and more to us as we believe.

There are two results of this glorious life-giving gospel as the Spirit of Lord works:

1. we are bold and open about our faith: “*therefore...*” (3:12) Boldness is better here as ‘openness’ and in contrast to the veil Moses wore, Paul is open and outspoken about his faith in Jesus, open to tell people what God has done and what he believes. This is not the first quality that springs to mind when we think about the Church in Scotland in 2011 or Scottish Christians generally, being open and bold about our faith. We tend to hide it, or to be a bit embarrassed to admit to Christian faith, and almost seem ashamed of what we believe and I suppose it is little wonder given the often hostile climate in which we live and work. Yet the gospel is full of glory and the gospel’s glory lasts forever, and will never fade away. So let’s be open and bold and not be ashamed, but when the opportunity arises tell our friends about our faith, and share something important.

2. We are people being transformed: “*we who...*” (3:18) It just gets better and better and bigger and bigger. Not only does the gospel make us new people, forgiven people, free people, but the same Spirit is at work in us making us more like Jesus. Jesus is the model human being, the perfect human being and we are being transformed bit by bit to become more and more like Him. The glory of being a Christian just gets bigger and bigger: not only are we God’s friends, but we are being transformed morally, spiritually to be more and more like Jesus.

It is literally glorious to be Christian, to be on receiving end of the glorious gospel of our glorious God. There is nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to be embarrassed about, nothing to hide away in a corner. God has given us life; God has set us free; God has forgiven us our sin; God has loved us endlessly and all this in Jesus Christ, in this new covenant, in these new promises. Old or new doesn’t enter into it; what matters is that the gospel works; the gospel makes us new, whole people; this is its glory. Believe the gospel not because it is old, nor because it is new, but believe the gospel because it works; enjoy the blessings of God; share the gospel with your friend; live out a life of faith; become more and more like Jesus. Isn’t it glorious?