Sermon S\_ Epiphany 5\_SCED\_February 9, 2025

If I were to ask you what is the gospel? I wonder what your considered response might be. I am not referring to the reading from one of the four gospels that we have each week in our services and that we call the “Gospel” in the service. I mean the Gospel that refers to the Good News that is central to our faith. Is anyone game to try to sum that up?

…

Well Paul in today’s New Testament reading from Corinthians gives what is a pretty minimalist gospel. He makes four basic points: he says the gospel is

* That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures
* That he was buried
* That he was raised (resurrected) on the third day
* And that he had a series of appearances (he mentions three specifically) which he claimed involved more than five hundred people including some very prominent followers of Jesus like Peter and the other disciples.

The first two of Paul’s Gospel elements that Jesus died and was buried are historically factual and considered proven. There is convincing historical evidence of Jesus’ existence and untimely death from writers like the Jewish historian Josephus and the Roman historians Tacitus and Seutonius as well as from the writings of the early church itself in manuscripts that were later compiled together to produce the New Testament. In fact there is as much documentary evidence of Christ’s existence as there is of the existence of Julius Caesar whose existence is rarely doubted.

Three other elements in Paul’s gospel are theological in that they are matters of faith: that Jesus died to overcome sin and that he was resurrected on the third day following his death and made a series of appearances to close friends and followers as well as to at least one large crowd.

Now Paul is an avid theologian who could write quite complex and dense treatises on how this dying for our sins was to be understood. (Much of the letter to the Romans is a good example of that kind of writing). But it is refreshing as well that as a preacher and teacher he could also sum the gospel up in such a simple way. That Jesus died for sin, was buried then raised, and seen by a significant number of people. So you might like to remember these 4 Gospel words: died, buried, resurrected and appeared.

Because we are all Christian people here and because most of us have been raised in the faith, I suspect that few of us would have any problems with Paul’s mini-gospel. But Paul also adds in today’s reading that by this gospel we are saved. This could mean that if we believe this gospel we are saved by it although it doesn’t say that. Or it could mean that through Christ’s death, burial, resurrection and appearances, Christ opened up the possibility for all human persons to be saved into eternity.

I wondered what it would be like to come up with a mini-gospel of my own, and I was able to write three short versions:

He first is based on a trinitarian model including in the gospel of salvation the work of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Spirit.

1. Trinitarian Gospel

That God the Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit (whose very nature is love),

formed Creation ,

blessed it,

saw it struggle between sanctity and sin,

came to struggle with it,

suffered and died to redeem it,

and now abides within it,

constantly restoring all that falls short of grace.

This God is with us from the beginning,

is present in our everyday,

and sustains us into eternity.

1. Christological Version

Jesus was the Word God spoke

to form creation,

the Word God sent to heal creation;

the Word God welcomed home

to help creation once more come home to itself.

1. Atonement.

It’s not so much that Jesus died to pay some notional price for sin, as though goodness and evil, sin and salvation, are trading units in a commodities market. It’s that Jesus in love absorbed within himself the sin and suffering found in creation. (I don’t know that he could help himself). And he let us lead him to a cross where he knew it could all be done to death. We stand at the foot of that cross, now empty, appalled at what we did, and renewed only because God allowed us to do it, and further renewed because Jesus let us do it to him.

Amen