The Message and the Messenger
Romans 1:1-15

Let me give you a scenario. You're in an exam. The invigilator says, 'You can start.' You turn over the paper and read the first and only question: 'What has had the greatest impact on Western civilisation? Give reasons for your answer.' What would you write?

Now, the engineers might say something like *the internal combustion engine.* While the more philosophically minded among us might put in a word for the Renaissance, or the Enlightenment, or Marx, or Freud.

And *obviously* you'd all be wrong, because *obviously* it's Paul's Letter to the Romans. And I don't say that facetiously. Paul wrote it around 57AD - and we're still reading it, and not many letters can claim that. But beyond that, think of its impact on those who've had an impact on Western culture.

Someone like Augustine. Because he'd tried everyone. He'd tried sex, and other religions. He tried philosophy and academic pursuits. He tried career success - and made it to the top - hobnobbing with the rich and powerful. But what did he discover? That none of those things could answer the restlessness of his heart.

But then, one day he's sat in a garden, moping over his condition, and he hears a child calling out, 'take up and read.' And the book beside him is a Bible and he picks it up, opens it at random, to this letter, reads what's on the page and says, 'It was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.' And he was converted, and the rest, as they say, is history. Arguably, your history.

Or think of Martin Luther, a monk, terrified of the holiness and wrath of God against sinners. And, he says, "Although an impeccable monk, I stood before God *as a sinner*…. Therefore I did *not* love a righteous and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him."

But then he discovered that there is a righteousness of God - a right standing and being declared not guilty by God, that's given as a gift, to those who trust Christ! And where did he discover it? By reading this letter. And that truth transformed him from a God-hating monk into a happy preacher of the gospel, and a happy husband and a happy father. Because in the phrase of the Reformation that followed his conversion, 'after darkness… light.'

Or take a stroll down the road to 16th century Geneva, where John Calvin is sat at his desk writing about this letter, that it was my 'entrance… to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture' that 'man's only righteousness is through the mercy of God in Christ… offered by the gospel [and] apprehended by faith.' And you might disagree with his theology, but you cant deny its impact.

So three men: Restless and doubting, anxious and guilt ridden, intellectually first rate but spiritually poor. And it was this letter that became for them a dispeller of doubt, a bringer of peace and an open door onto vast spiritual treasures.

So if this letter had the power to change them, what about us?

Well, that's what we're going to be looking at over the coming weeks. How by receiving the perfect righteousness of Christ, free of charge, you can flourish in life. Because, if you noticed, Paul's introduction, which sets the stage for the rest of the letter, deals with three things we all need if

we're to live a truly good life - and flourish in life: an identity, a story, and a purpose. Which is what we're going to look at today.

An Identity
Look at v1: 'Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus.' What would you have written? If like Paul, you had one sentence to introduce yourself…what would you say?

'I'm so and so's son… or daughter'; 'I'm British'; 'I'm a financial controller.' Or, as people who study identity tell us we do, you might define yourself by who you're not: 'I'm American - but not the kind you're thinking of.' However you do it, you define yourself someway.

And Paul's no different. Because at one level, he's simply saying, 'I'm Paul and I'm a Christian.' But if that was *all* he was saying, it's still something, isn't it? Because it's saying that you've encountered something in Christ that totally changes the way you see yourself… that becomes *the* defining thing about you. But secondly, to be a Christian, then and now, is to swim against the flow.

And yet, Paul's saying something more than just he's a Christian, isn't he. Because to say he's a servant, or as you could translate it, a slave of Christ, is to say he has a master. Which, in a culture like ours, that highly values personal freedom, might sound repressive: 'A master? Who wants a master?'

But are you as free as you think you are? You see, if last week we saw we all *worship* something, we also all *serve* something, don't we? Or, as Jesus provocatively puts it in John 8, we're all a *slave* to something. Like ambition, or the need to acquire. Or some habit that's got a hold of you, or other people's opinion of you. And like a slave master this thing drives what you do and why you do it.

Or, putting it differently, at the end of the day, something or someone tells you, 'good job, well done'. And it's the voice you most want to hear that from, or the one you most fear hearing the opposite from, that's your master. The voice that determines do you go to bed at night at peace or eaten up by self-loathing or pride.

And Paul's saying, Christ's my master. He's the one who defines me, who motivates all I do. And by his grace, I have his approval.

So if you're not yet a Christian, ask yourself, who or what is your master, and is it as kind as Christ?

But then Paul says, verse 1 again, 'Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, *called to be an apostle,* set apart for the gospel of God.' What do you think of when you think of a calling, or a vocation? We tend to think of a job, don't we? She's following her vocation as a doctor, or a teacher. And being an apostle was job, so Paul's saying the same, isn't he?

Except *apostle* means *one who is sent*… by *someone*. So for Paul, his primary calling is to some*one*, not some*thing*. That it's Christ who roots his identity, and his work.

But make it your work, and your identity is always going to be fragile isn't it? Because who are you when you're not doing well at work, or the grants dry up, or you're laid off, or retirement comes? If, 'Hi, I'm…' add your name - is followed by your job, what happens when there is no job? Who are you then?

But it's not like Paul applied for the job, is it? It's not like he always wanted to be an apostle, and worked out the best master's program, and did a bit of networking, and applied and got it.

No! He was going in totally the opposite direction. And when he was first called by Christ, he was a man sent on a mission not by Christ, but by those who had crucified Christ.

And yet, it was that encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, *that* calling, that defined him. Well, have you had such a life-defining encounter and calling in your own life? Because if you're a Christian, the answer's 'yes'. Not to be an apostle, obviously, but to be Christ's. And if you're not yet a Christian, and you feel a bit lost in life, or wonder who you are, it's Christ who can give you a rock-solid identity and a sense of calling.

Because did you notice how he describes the people he's writing to? He's called to be an apostle and set apart of the gospel, and they, v6, are 'called to belong to Jesus Christ' and v7, 'loved by God and called to be saints.' Or, as you could translate *saint*, called to be *set apart*.

So here are a bunch of ordinary people who have experienced something just as extraordinary as Paul: because they too have been called, summoned - to belong to Christ, to be loved by God, and to be set apart for him.

And what was true for them is true for you, if like them you put your trust in Christ, and find your identity in him. That if you feel rootless - you can know what it is to belong to one who never shifts like the shadows; that if you feel unlovely or unloved, you can know what it is to be loved, by the fount of all love; that if you feel unseen, you can know what it is to be chosen and set apart for the One who works all things for his glory and your good.

Ok, but one more thing on Paul, that matters for what's to come. You see, if I went to Brussels, walked into the EU, and started talking about Swiss foreign policy and Swiss-EU bilateral agreements, would anyone listen? No. I wouldn't even be let in the door. Why not? Identity and authority - 'Who are you?'

But what if I was the Swiss Ambassador? What if the government had sent me? And Paul's been called and sent by Christ. So in what follows in this letter, we don't go, 'oh that's just Paul'. What he writes, he writes with the authority of Christ.

So notice again how he finishes his self-introduction: Verse 1: 'Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for *the gospel of God*.'

It's the second thing we need to live a truly good life:

A Story

In his recent book, *Why Your Work Matters*, Tom Nelson argues that we all see our lives, and within our lives, our work, in the middle of one story or another. It could be a story of what you've had to overcome to get where you are today; it could be a story of rags to riches, or of hard work and graft and career success. Or as Miroslav Volf, the Yale theologian, argues in his book *Ambition*, a story of superiority, and gaining it over others. Or at the other extreme, of a Baloo the Bear pursuit of pleasure and instant gratification and the bear necessities of life.

Whatever it is, there will be some plot line you see your life and work set in.

What's that story for Paul? Well, that's what the next 16 chapters are about - but here he gives us a summary.

Verse 1: 'the gospel of God.' And *gospel* means *good news*. Which means it's not a check list of what you've got to do, or a resumé of what you've done. It's a proclamation of what someone else has done for you. It's like the true story, straight from the battle field, that the king has won the battle. It's like the breaking news that an amnesty has been declared and all rebels are pardoned.

And the ultimate gospel, Paul says, is the gospel *of God*. Now, when you imagine yourself in some scenario or other, some story that plays in your mind, who takes centre stage? Who takes the role of the hero, or the one who does the great act, or makes the wise intervention, that wins the day? Don't we tend to put ourselves there?

But what if someone goes through life thinking that not just their dreams, but life itself, is about them, and everyone's else's stories should revolve around them? Then things get pretty screwy, don't they? And yet, when we think things like 'we're the master of our fate' aren't we claiming to control things way out of our control? Or 'life isn't giving me what I deserve, what I want', that the universe *should* revolve around me?

And yet Paul knows *the ultimate* story is not about him at all. It's about God. And isn't that way more psychologically healthy? Because it gives him a rock solid identity and sense of calling minus the narcissism.

Plus, it's the gospel, v2, 'he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures.' So this isn't something Paul's invented. This is something God's foretold and foreshadowed over generations: through law and prophets, through sacrifice and ritual, through kings and priests. And that matters, because history mattered to the Romans. But doesn't it for you as well? You see, as a city, they saw themselves as a people set in a glorious past. And new was not necessarily better. But aren't you also just a bit jaded by the advertisers and manufacturers, that new *is* always better? And read the social surveys and people feel lonely and rootless. Because we long for the lasting, for the rooted, for the historic, for something with substance. Well, *this* story has roots that stretch *way* back, Paul says. And so it can root you.

And it is, v3, 'Concerning his Son.' Bette Midler, the American comedian, famously said, 'Well, that's enough about me. Let's talk about you. What do you think about me?' And if we're in danger of thinking the story of life is about us, we can come to the Bible thinking 'if this book is going to have anything to say to me, then it's got to be about me.' Well, it's not, Paul says, it's about Jesus.

But again, in an age of narcissism, isn't that strangely good news?

And it tells us that this Son, v3, 'was descended from David according to the flesh.' So he is heir to all the promises God had made David of descendent, a king, who would reign forever.

And yet, to talk of his descent *according to the flesh* implies another descent, according to another nature, doesn't it? Verse 4, 'And was declared to be *the Son of God* in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.'

Now, if I told you, 'I'm the son of a small town pharmacist in the UK' you probably wouldn't bat an eyelid, would you. But if I said, 'I'm the son of the late Queen of England and the rightful heir to all her realms', you'd say, 'sure you are buddy, prove it.'

So what about Jesus' claims? Because if you come to the gospels thinking he's a great moral example, what about his claims that on the lips of anyone else we'd dismiss as the crassest narcissism? That he was *the* Son of God, heir to the kingdom of God, and equal to God himself? 'Sure you are, buddy, prove it.' Well, that's exactly what his resurrection did, Paul says. The very thing that ends every life and humbles every claim, could not end him. The thing that none of us has power over, he overpowered.

That's who this greatest of stories is about, Paul says. Verse 4, 'Jesus Christ our Lord.'

But think again about who Paul's writing this to? Christians in a city, the epicentre of an empire, where Caesar was Lord. Ah, but he's not, Paul's saying. Christ has been raised from the dead. And it's him who is seated in the place of ultimate power. And so if the gospel is good news for a narcissistic age, isn't it also good news in an age of polarising powers, when powerful men want the story to be about them? But it's not, Paul says. Because whatever obedience we owe earthly governments, and Paul will set that out in chapter 13, ultimately they're not the story. Christ is. So why make political power *your* story? Christ is enthroned on high, not Caesar.

And it's through Christ, Paul says in v5, that Paul has 'received grace and apostleship to bring about *the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all nations.*' It's a phrase that sandwiches the entire letter. Here, right at the beginning, and again right at the end, in the penultimate verse of the letter: the gospel, which 'has been made known to all nations… to bring about the obedience of faith' (16:26).

Now, the best stories leave you wanting to change something about your life, don't they? You walk out the cinema, or turn the last page, and you determine to be more courageous, or become more generous. And the gospel's no different. It can't help but change your life - because it demands a response. But that change begins with faith, Paul says, by believing it and trusting all that Christ has done for you. And the change that follows is a long and happy obedience. Because when you know Christ is Lord, you obey. And when you know he's good, you're happy to. It's why Martin Luther said, 'We are saved by faith alone… but the faith that saves is never alone.' Because it's always going to show itself through a life filled with good works, to the glory of a good Lord.

Because if to live a truly good life you need a rock-solid identity, and a true story to see yourself in, thirdly, you also need…

A Purpose

Verse 11, 'I long to see you, that I may impart to you *some spiritual gift* to strengthen you.' And maybe you go, 'oooh, I wonder what spiritual gift that might be? Prophecy? Speaking in tongues?' Well, once again, right at the end of the letter, he tells us: 'Now to him who is able to *strengthen you* according to *my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ*' (16:25). So what's the gift that will

strengthen them? The gospel. The proclamation of all that Christ has done for them… and us. That's what will build them up.

And did you notice in v11, Paul doesn't just *want* to do it. He *longs* to do it. He longs to pour himself out in service, to see them be strengthened as Christians.

Why? Because according to the gospel, Christ poured himself out, at the cross, that we might be filled. He became weak that we might become strong. He went to the lowest place that we might be lifted to the highest. And the Son of God, the king to fulfil all kings, became a servant that we might be seated with him in glory.

And when, like Paul, you get that, it motivates you - not to live a life of lording it over others, but to live a life of service for others. And to use your gifts to strengthen others.

And yet, it's not a one-way street, is it? Verse 12, 'that is, that we may be *mutually* encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.' Because even an apostle needs encouragement, doesn't he? We all do, including the person next to you!

So what if we had a culture of gospel-soaked encouragement? What if every week, every one of us saw it as our aim, our purpose, to go to home group, and bible study, and church with the intention of building one another up? By spotting the newcomer, and greeting one another warmly, and singing with all our hearts, and deciding 'I'm not leaving today until I've said *something* encouraging to *someone*.' That would create something special, wouldn't it? A church marinated in the gospel.

But the gospel also motivates Paul *to share* the gospel. Verses 14-15: 'I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. *So I am eager* to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.'

So, Paul's planning his trip to Rome, and he's working out what he's going to teach them, what his preaching series is going to be when he gets there. How to be a better parent? The 5 keys to a powerful prayer life? No. What is it these Christians need to hear? The gospel - because we never graduate from it.

But not just the Christians. Verse 13, 'that I may reap some harvest among you.' A harvest inside the church and outside the church. To encourage and to evangelise. And he says he's indebted to those outside because God has given him something to give to them. And until he does, he owes them. And that something is the gospel. The same thing God has placed into our hands to give to others.

So the gospel gives you an identity that you can rest in and stand on: you are chosen and you are loved. It sets you in a story, the greatest of stories, that can root you and make sense of life - that it's not about you, it's about Christ. And it has the power to fill your life with purpose: to take every opportunity to share the good news that was shared with us. To encourage and to evangelise. Inside and outside.