The Transforming Gospel
1 Cor 15:1-11

So, if you haven't realized it already, we're a bit odd as a church. And we're odd, because if we moved this church to your home country, you almost certainly wouldn't come to it, because there would be all these other churches you could choose from. And the reason many of us are here, is that there isn't exactly much choice if you want to find an English-speaking church, and if there was more choice you probably wouldn't be here. Which, if nothing else, is a good way of keeping your pastors humble.

And because we all come from different backgrounds and traditions and because we may all be looking for different things in a church, I want us to start off this new academic year by looking at our church vision. Because the truth is there are a multitude of different things that we could emphasize as a church; and maybe you wish we did emphasize. And if you had the choice, you'd go to a church that gave more attention to that.

So this morning I want us to see why our vision is what it is, and why it is something each of us can and should embrace. And if you don't know what our vision is, it's 'rooted in the gospel; radical transformation': that all of us would be so rooted in the gospel, and the gospel so rooted in us, that it would have a wonderful, radical transforming effect on our lives.

But rather than just give you some proof texts for that, I want us to look at a passage in the Bible where the apostle Paul talks about what is of first importance for a church, and let the Bible speak for itself.

1 Cor 15:1-11

Three points: 1. **Here we stand**, which is why the gospel matters; 2. We're going to be clear about what we mean by the gospel, which is **When a definition matters**; and 3. **Grace and the power of change** and how the gospel brings about transformation in our lives.

Here we stand
Back in the UK, almost every village and town has one of these large stone war memorials, and they have listed on them the names of the young men who gave their lives in the first and second world wars. And often on those monuments will be carved the words, 'Lest we forget.' Now, what's interesting is that those memorials were put up in the years immediately after the wars, and yet people, even in those early days, already recognized this tendency to forget the sacrifice others had made.

And I tell you that because Paul starts this passage by saying to the church at Corinth, v1, 'I would remind you, brothers [and sisters], of the gospel.' And that's interesting because it's not like they're an old church, stuck in tradition. They're young, the church at Corinth hasn't been going that long, and yet already Paul feels the need to remind them about the gospel. He sees all the issues the Corinthians are struggling with and the mess they're in, and his response is: 'guys, you need to remember the gospel.' And he says that because just like people living in peace time can forget the sacrifice that made that peace possible, so both as individual Christians, and as churches, we can suffer from what

someone else has called, 'gospel amnesia'. We enjoy the peace, the Christian life, and move on, and forget about what makes that Christian life possible. And because there's that tendency to forget, the apostle says, 'hey, let me remind you.'

Now, why does he do that? Why does the gospel matter for their situation? Well, the first answer is because the gospel is the very foundation on which the Christian faith is built. Verse 3: 'For I delivered to you *as of first importance* what I also received.' In other words, 'brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel, which was passed on to me, and I passed it on to you, because this is what really matters, because this is first rank stuff.' You could talk about a whole load of others things, you could make the strap line of your church 101 other things, you could argue and divide over this or that theological small print. But it's this that is of first importance. Paraphrasing the words of Bill Clinton, 'it's the gospel, stupid.'

But, you could hear that and think, 'yes, sure, but when your friends come and visit your house you don't keep taking them down to see the foundations, sure foundations are important but once laid they're unseen, and if the gospel's the foundation, don't you need to move on, and build up. I mean, I get why you'd preach the gospel to unbelievers but why keep making that the thing you concentrate on as a church?'

And the reason is that Paul knows that the gospel matters for now. He wants to remind them of it, not so they go on some sort of short-lived guilt trip or have one day a year of sober reflection, as might happen when we remember the war dead, but because he knows the gospel has power for the present, and for the future, and not just for the past.

Look what he says in v1: 'Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received [that's past], in which you stand [that's present], and by which you are being saved [and that's present but looking to the future].

So this gospel he wants them to remember is not just a once and for all thing in the past, that you receive at the beginning, 'believe in Jesus, become a Christian and then move on.' It's what you and I as Christians stand in *now*. And the sense of that is less of a dead, inert, concrete foundation that a house is built *on* but far more of the living, life giving soil that an oak tree is rooted *in*.

Now the other day we took a tour round Laurence's garden. And he showed us his hydrangea bushes, with their incredibly beautiful, deep blue flowers. But the colour of those flowers is almost entirely dependent on the minerals in the soil they're standing in. Plant them in poor quality soil and the flowers are limp and insipid; plant them in rich soil and they colours are vibrant. And the truth is, it matters hugely what the ground is that you and I as Christians, and churches are planted in, what's feeding them. And Paul sees the mess the Corinthians are in and says, 'guys, I need to remind you of the gospel, this is what you need to be rooted in.'

But as well as the past and the present, Paul also says the gospel has power for the future. He says that it's the gospel 'by which you are being saved.' It's the gospel that is making you fit for heaven. It's the gospel that you received, past. It's the gospel that you stand in, present; but it's also the gospel that is saving you, that has this on going, transforming power, that will see you through to the last day and into eternity.

But the question is: what is the gospel?

When a definition matters

Well, the Greek word that we translate 'gospel' means good, great, important news. So if a king or an emperor sent out his heralds to proclaim in the streets the birth of a royal son, or an amnesty to prisoners, or a victory over the enemy, it was good news, it was gospel. And so the Bible writers, when they were looking for a word to describe what it was they were proclaiming chose that one: hey listen, this is gospel, this is good, this is great, this is important news.

But news about what?

Well Paul tells us: v3-4. 'For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, [and] that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.'

So, the Gospel is all about what God has done and is doing in and through Jesus. Which is interesting, because it means that the gospel is not: 'hey this is what you need to do'; it's not, 'listen, this is what you've got to get right in your life', it's not even the two most important commandments, love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. At its root, the gospel is not what you and I do at all. The gospel is all about the good news of what God has done for you.

It's the truth that for all ages, revealed through the Scriptures, God was going to rescue and redeem a people to himself; and that he has done that by sending his Son, to die for us. Not just to be a fine example, not just to teach us, but to die for our sins, to take upon himself all the punishment and all the rejection and all the forsakenness that we deserve for thumbing our noses at God; that at the cross, because of his love for us, the king himself has paid the ultimate price to redeem rebels like us, so that we can enter and enjoy his kingdom. And it's the good news that God has vindicated and set his seal of approval upon Jesus as his Son, by raising him from the dead. And if you think that's all make-believe, Paul says, here is a list of 500-plus people who saw him alive again.

You see, the Gospel is about what God has done for us. What religion proclaims is 'we need to build our ladder to God, and here's how to do it.' And what philosophy proclaims is, 'there is no God, here's how to be a better you.' But the Gospel proclaims… you're in hole, but God loves you, and this is what God has done and is doing to rescue you, and far from you building your ladder, he has descended the ladder and has carried you on his shoulders up and out of the pit.

So the gospel isn't about what we do. It's not about getting your life right, or church attendance, or tithing your money, or being a good husband and father, even though those things may come as a consequence of the gospel. The gospel is this wonderful proclamation of what God has done for us in Jesus; and Paul says: yes, and this is what you need to keep on reminding yourself of, this is what you stand and are rooted in, this is what is of first importance, and it's this that is saving you, that transforms you.

But how does that work? How can remembering, and keep on coming back to Jesus giving himself for us, lead to lasting change in our lives?

Grace and the Power of Change

Now the desire for change is just about everywhere, isn't it? Just consider all the gyms and fitness clubs on every street corner, and the craze for the latest diet, or the shelves of magazines and books offering you the latest insight on how to improve your life. These all tell us that whether its our desire for a leaner, fitter body, or a better sex-life, or psychological wellbeing, or skill in the board room, we want something better, there is this dissatisfaction with how our lives are 'now'. We're at A but we want to be at B. And whilst we may disagree about what B is going to look like: is it bigger biceps, or just a less stressed life, there is this inner desire for change.

And the Bible tells us why. Created in the image of God, we have fallen from those heights, and that image is marred by sin and deep inside we know we are not what we should be, or could be. And like a man in a pitch-black cellar, scrabbling on his hands and knees, reaching out and searching in the darkness for the stairs that will take him up to the light, we search for something, anything, that promises change, that will help us feel better about ourselves, that will answer that longing for transformation.

And the Bible says, that lasting change you want, that restoration to who you are supposed to be, will only ever come through the gospel. Anything else is just wallpapering the cracks. You see the real issue is not your body, it's not your personal confidence, it's not your husband or wife, it's you. And it's only God who can change you on the inside. It's only God who can restore the image of God. As Paul says, 'we… are being transformed into the same image [and that's the image of God] from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.' (2 Cor 3:18).

And the Spirit works that transformation through the gospel. And just look how Paul says that has worked in his life: v9, 'For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.' That's the man Paul used to be. Outwardly very religious, but inside proud, angry, violent. But both he and the Corinthians know that that's not Paul now. And he tells us what brought about that change in his life. Verse 10: 'But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.' 'It's God's grace to me, it's the grace of God displayed in the gospel, this incredible good news of Jesus, that the Son of God would die for me, a persecutor, it's that grace that has changed me into the man I am today.'

And he knows that that grace is continuing to change him. Paul is working flat out for the gospel, v10, 'I worked harder than any of them', but he knows where that energizing power that brings about change in his life and in others comes from, 'though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.'

But the question is of course, how does that work? How does the Holy Spirit use grace, and the good news of God's grace to us in Jesus, to bring about change in our lives? Well, that's what I want us to look at really briefly, and I want to do it by looking at some case histories, both for us as individuals and for us as a church.

And the first one I want to call **deep, united community**. Now just imagine there's a church, and the people who go to this church come from multiple nationalities and multiple racial backgrounds; and multiple church streams and traditions; and they differ in their politics and their views on multiple different stuff. So there are all these fault lines that such a church could fracture down. How can the individual members in such a church love and accept and welcome people who are so different to themselves, and do so in a way that creates a deep, united community to God's glory? Well, listen to what Paul writes in Romans 15: *'We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.'*

How can a church like us enjoy deep, united community to God's glory? By letting it sink in that if Jesus has welcomed me, me with all my faults and failings, then in his power, I can welcome and accept my brothers and sisters with all their faults and failings. When the penny drops that Jesus did not live to please himself, but gave himself up for us, to accept us and welcome us, it will profoundly transform the way we see and welcome one another.

Take the Pharisee and the tax collector in Jesus' parable as an example. There they are, two men from very different backgrounds, worshipping and praying in the same church. But the Pharisee think he's better than his neighbour, so he looks down his nose and criticizes the tax collector. But the tax collector, he knows what he's like, and he knows he needs grace for himself, so he isn't pointing the finger at anybody. And its only when we realize that we need and have been shown radical grace in Jesus, that he has welcomed and accepted me, even though I don't deserve it, that I can find and extend that grace to others.

The second case history is **forgiveness**. Maybe someone has hurt you; they have sinned against you. But you know that unforgiveness on your part will just lead to bitterness and ultimately mean that their sin wins. But you're struggling to forgive. So how can you do it? Now, remember forgiveness is not saying sin

doesn't matter, sin does matter, it matters profoundly. But when you're struggling to forgive, what can make that change in your heart?

Well, listen to what Paul says in Colossians 3:12-13: *'Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.'* And there it is again. It's as we understand the gospel, just how far we were from God, just how underserving of forgiveness we were, but that Christ died for us, that we might be forgiven, that he has shown that level of grace to us, that we can find our hearts being melted out of the deep freeze of unforgiveness, and extend forgiveness to others. It's understanding deep inside Jesus' grace to us that helps us unlock the prison door of bitterness towards others. Not to excuse their sin, but to let go of them in forgiveness.

But the third case history I want to call **selfless service**. All of us, I suspect, feel this inner guardedness to put ourselves and our needs first. We want to hold on to our time and our money, and put 'me' at the centre of things. And yet we also know that Jesus calls us to a radical life of self-denial and service of others. So how do we get there? How do we see change in our lives from being self-centred and self-interested to serving others as Christ would have us. Well, listen to what Paul says in Philippians 2: *'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.'* Or when it comes to how we use our money, this is what Paul says when he's encouraging the Corinthian Christians to be generous in their giving to the struggling Jerusalem church: *'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.'* (2 Cor 8:9).

So, the way to see our hearts change from self-centredness and holding on to what's ours, is to think deeply about how Jesus made himself nothing for me; how he who deserves all the service in the world, the Son of God, became a servant for me, how he humbled himself for me, how he became poor for me. And as that dawns on us, we find that willingness to serve growing and our hands opening.

You see, it really is the grace of God in the Gospel that the Spirit uses to bring about deep transformation in our lives, and move us out into the world in love. It's why Paul writes to Titus and says, 'For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.' (Titus 2:11-14).

So, at the start of this new term, I want to encourage all of us, as individuals and as a church, to allow the gospel to do this transforming work in our lives; and to take hold of, and think deeply about and live for a vision bigger than a hundred other secondary things, and to give ourselves to this vision, to what the Bible says is of first importance, the gospel of the grace of God, with all its past, present and future transforming power, and to do that for the glory of God.