

## ***The gospel is universal***

I feel as if, over the past few months, I've been journeying up a beautiful mountainside. This morning, as I continue to explore, I seem to be coming out into a place where there's a much broader panoramic view. The more I discover, the better it gets – all very exciting!

You're all being very patient with me, but please bear with me as I again retrace my personal journey of these past few years.

– In my sect, I was convinced that being right was really, really important, because those who weren't right simply wouldn't make it.

– I pulled out and then, for a few years, I rebuilt my faith in God along traditional lines.

– Then I (re-)discovered the Trinity and got really excited. As I had thought all along, God really **IS** relational and God is desperate to **include** people, not to exclude them. This is something worth sharing, right?!

– Recently, I've discovered that the gospel itself is **inclusive**. It is simply 'the story of Jesus' (in fulfilment of the OT, and as described in the NT), and so the gospel is **universal**, it transcends space, time, culture, ethnicity, gender; it's the same yesterday, today and forever. This is something **really** worth sharing, innit?!

Can you see why it's so, so exciting?! It means that Christians can unite around the universal truths – the ancient creeds, which spell out who God is as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that Jesus 'died and rose again for us'. We don't need to argue about minor details; rather, we can get on with 'preaching the gospel' in the widest sense of that phrase – just being Jesus in our communities, caring for others, spreading his love. And this transcends denomination. Praise God!

Now, do you remember, six months ago, I introduced you to my friend 'Martha', who was being strongly encouraged by her church to 'share the gospel' with her friends and family (F&F). She gives her life to her F&F, she serves them, she cares for them, she loves them, and yet she doesn't feel she can 'share the gospel'. 'I just can't bring myself to talk to them like that!'

So Martha now feels **guilty** because she thinks that she's not sharing the gospel with her F&F. And she's **full of fear** because she sees her F&F heading for hell – and it's all her fault!

Someone please tell me, where does that fear and guilt come from? Does it come from God? Or from some other source?

But what is it that **actually** stops Martha's friends and families from finding, appreciating and enjoying the love of God in Christ Jesus? Is it **really** because no-one is willing to tell them that they are sinners in need of a Saviour? Or is it some or all of the following?

– seeing the constant in-fighting between denominations, between churches, within churches?  
– our insistence that <blank> behaviour is wrong? <insert any 'important biblical principle'>

- our judgemental attitudes as we ‘try to maintain standards’?
- our insistence that ‘proper’ church is Sunday worship in a building?
- our exclusion of women from church ministry (albeit that insistence is crumbling)?
- our attitude to certain minorities?

And can you see that, at the heart of those issues, is a concentration on who is right and who is wrong. But what is it that ruins human relationships? Blame and shame, lack of trust, insistence on being right. And that can all too easily be what we model in our churches, and so that’s the image of God that we convey to our F&F: God will exclude you unless and until you accept ‘what (we say) the Bible teaches’.

So what would you advise Martha to do? For a start, remember that ‘perfect love casts out fear’, so try to spend time with fellow Christians who aren’t always obsessing about being ‘right’. If you could actually **enjoy** your relationship with God, free from fear and guilt, that would be a pretty good start. It would make you a more attractive person, as you go about helping people (which I know you already do).

But I’m not unrealistic; it’s not actually as simple as that. I think we still have some work to do. We still have a very narrow view of the cross – which is the centre point of the gospel, of course. By insisting on the ‘right’ view of the cross – the one single punishment-based view – we’ve robbed it of its full power to transform lives.

Sure, if our F&F have, like Martin Luther, a crushing realisation of their own sin, then the cross seen as Jesus taking the punishment for our sins is very, very good news. But how many of your F&F feel like Martin Luther? So if that is our **only** view of the work that Jesus did on the cross, we would **first** have to convince our F&F that they **do** have that desperate need, so we can then say: ‘Ta da! Jesus is the answer! Good news, eh?!’

Why don’t we actually find out what the perceived need is of our F&F? Do you think that God, through the cross, could meet that need? Well, I do!

So my Lenten efforts are being directed towards working out exactly **how** the cross can meet their needs. I want to work out how to ‘always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...’ (1 Pet 3:5)

*May you grow in your enjoyment of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and in your appreciation of the massive power of the gospel, and may you be a blessing to those around you, many of whom are struggling and need a real friend.*

**Lord, let it be!**

Paul Bev. 14.3.19