

## Sermon Notes for Trinity XI

*“the gospel which I preached unto you”* (Epistle)

Sometimes we can use historical scholarship on the New Testament. Today's epistle does benefit from chronology. Because Roman governors tended to leave inscriptional evidence, we can put at least narrow ranges of dates to some aspects of Paul's life and letters. So the date of the first letter to the Corinthians is about 55. It is probably earlier than any of the Gospels, and the first of the New Testament books to be quoted (in Clement of Rome's letter to the Corinthians).

But Paul is reminding the church of what he taught when he first evangelised them (probably about 50). And we can go further. Paul's language “delivered” and “received” is technical. To be strict, what we call “rabbinic” thought was only beginning to develop, and Greek is not rabbinic Hebrew. But clearly Paul asserts that the content was received from others – which we might reasonably assume (from Galatians) would be when Paul first met Peter and James. (It could of course be part of what Paul learnt slightly earlier, at his conversion.) It is already in a tight, relatively memorable and so fixed, form.

Now this takes us back into the mid-30s; and the crucifixion is about the start of that decade. So we have a testimony to the passion, resurrection and resurrection appearances stabilised within only a few years of the events, while all the major players (and most of the minor ones) were still alive and able to criticise or to approve it. It is not of course the whole story. It was designed to provide a sufficient (selective) structure of witness which would be functional for its original envisaged hearers. How it was elaborated in practice, we simply do not know. The later gospels (not Mark) naturally provide a different selection, made in different circumstances and for different envisaged hearers.

Here then is a primitive gospel, that is, a summary of the essentials of the good news. I think it has a rather different balance from modern “gospel preaching”. Yes, “Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures” (which could only have meant as prophesied in the Old Testament) is there, but as a preliminary, not the point of the passage. We are at risk of using the appearances to prove the resurrection, and the resurrection mainly as demonstrating the Father's acceptance of the passion. I do not reject this, but was it the point that the passage was designed to make? We may ignore for the moment the secondary use Paul makes of this passage, by adding himself onto the list of appearances. It still remains the case that in the passage the appearances seem to be the main point, and both passion and resurrection relatively preparatory. Why? I suggest it was because the infant Church needed to demonstrate Christ's authority above all, and the appearances convey that authority in a way which neither the undeniable brute fact of the crucifixion nor an alleged empty tomb could do.

Authority is not without hazard. What I have just said was enthusiastically seized upon by the forgers of “secret gospels” to give credibility to their inventions as revelations made in the “forty days”. Similarly, some forms of Roman Catholic apologetics make much of unwritten traditions, and the “forty days” are a way to ground them. But none of the canonical gospels attribute *new* teaching to this period. No new Testament writer claims access to such revelations. You might argue that John 21 hints at Peter's and John's futures – but this is hardly a teaching for all time, and indeed the whole chapter is barely a resurrection story at all. Resurrection appearances do *not* matter as a context for new teaching. They do matter as a sign of Christ's authority and therefore of the authority which the Church claims for itself, as commissioned by him.

This is Paul's point. He too has “seen the Lord”. He too has the authority which comes from a resurrection appearance. He is not outclassed by Peter and James.

So if we use this passage as an early proof of the resurrection we are right in so far as it is very early and it is evidence. But that was not the original point. Nobody aware of the facts doubted the crucifixion. Many Jews (and proselytes) believed that resurrection at least of some faithful would happen and so would be open to evidence that it had in a particular case. But when a dead man is thrown into Elisha's grave and comes to life, or when Lazarus comes forth, no new belief is generated, no new form of Judaism. It was the appearances and their implications that made the difference. That is the message of the gospels (and here I do include the long ending of Mark). So, the passage implies, these are the witnesses; this is why you should take us seriously.