

27th August 2023 – The People of God #13 ‘Apostolic’ (Mark 3:13-15, Acts 2:42-47)

A man wakes up on a sunny summer morning in a large and prosperous city. He’s a businessman: a wool merchant, trading in the fleeces which arrive in the city from the farms around it. He enjoys his work and a nice home in the city – but his life has changed recently. A few months ago he heard the news, for the first time, about a saviour for the world, Jesus Christ. He’s always been brought up to be vaguely religious, much like his friends and family; but this was different. The message intrigued him and he started attending meetings at the home of one of Jesus’ so-called ‘followers’. He liked the people he met – they seemed really genuine, and he was amazed at how people from different backgrounds were all valued, and all treated each other with care and as equals.

He decided that he really wanted to become a follower of The Way, too – and last month he was baptised. His family weren’t too sure about it, but they can see that this new-found faith has made him happy, and now he attends meetings every Sunday morning, and sometimes in the week as well.

But today feels different. Today, he’s confused. Last week, a visiting speaker came to visit the Sunday meeting, and had lots of new ideas. He talked a lot about the importance of our bodies, and how we should only eat certain foods. He also claimed that there were certain secrets that really spiritual people had to learn, that faith in Jesus was only a starting point, there were lots of new dimensions to add. He was particularly keen on angels – angels were really the key to the spiritual life, and every believer had to learn more about them. The greatest angel of all was Michael, whom he’d heard about from some scripture readings. Michael had special powers and worshipping Michael opened doors in the spiritual life that Jesus didn’t really talk about. Jesus just kept to the basics: loving God and neighbour – which is all good, but it’s only where you start. If you really want to be spiritual, you need more teaching like this.

And so the man wonders if he really wants to attend the meetings anymore. He’s enjoyed learning about Jesus, and he thought that would be enough; but now he’s heard that the speaker is holding an ‘angel’ meeting just down the road and it sounds really interesting. Perhaps he’ll take a look at that – after all, what’s the harm? PAUSE

So, a question – when was that story written? It could easily have been 21st century Britain. Leaf through our media or surf the web for a while and you’ll see lots of stuff about angels, secret life hacks, and endless stuff about diet. And not just as lifestyle choices, but things with spiritual benefits. Try this technique, eat that superfood, buy this charm bracelet, and you’ll not just be healthier, you’ll be happier and more successful, too. It’s all around us – it’s the culture we breathe.

In fact, that story was based nearly 2,000 years ago and dates to about 60AD, and the location is the city of Colosse, in what is now Turkey. That was the culture that they breathed, too. A small church had been planted about ten years previously and would have met on Sundays, just like we do – though probably much earlier, soon after dawn to mirror the resurrection.

It was a relatively prosperous centre of the wool trade, and also the centre of the worship of the Archangel Michael. It was heavily influenced by Greek religious thought, especially so-called Gnostic teachers (from the Greek word for knowledge) who derived their ideas ultimately from Plato and who were big on secret knowledge. It was easy to absorb all religious worldviews into their teachings, since all paths were just a starting point. Jesus was fine, and as good a start point as any other –

but to really become spiritual you had to add this, and that, and the other. There were *levels* to faith, and the more practices you mastered, the more spiritual you became.

The spiritual supermarket is nothing new. It's as old as the church. The question that believers faced *then* is exactly the one that believers face *now* – how do we know what's the good stuff and what isn't? How do we tell what the real Christian faith is? What would Jesus say was good and what wouldn't he? What are we missing?

As we conclude our big series today with the last word from our weeks in the creed – apostolic – this little story gets to heart of why the creed has this word 'apostolic'. 'I believe in the *apostolic* church' – in other words, **I believe in the teaching about Jesus Christ given by the original generation of Christian leaders, the apostles** – what basically became the New Testament of the bible.

Our bible readings give us the background: that very short passage in Mark tells us that Jesus appoints twelve people, and gives them special authority, not just to communicate his message, but to have power over demonic spiritual beings. In other words, they operated as proxies for Jesus himself, and this spiritual authority doesn't just grow during their 3-year apprenticeship with Jesus, but especially after the pouring out of Jesus' Spirit at Pentecost. The first church described in our second reading doesn't just see 'many signs and wonders done by the apostles', this original church also 'devotes itself to the apostles' teaching'. It is founded and based upon what Peter and the other apostles teach about Jesus Christ.

And this is what becomes the Christian faith that we know. All those struggles we described a few weeks ago in the 4th century nailing down the creed in the end boiled down to this question: what did Jesus' appointed teachers *actually teach* about Jesus, about salvation, about the Holy Spirit, and so on? This was how the church started, and this is how it should continue. If it ain't broke, don't fix it! **You can't improve upon the gospel given by Jesus, taught by his apostles.** It was good enough for the first generation of Christians, it was good enough in the 4th century, and it's good enough now.

It's also helpful to look at how St Paul addressed the problems that little church in Colosse was struggling with. His message, now kept for us in the wonderful letter to the Colossians, is that **Christ is everything we need**. He is the image of God, carries all the authority in the universe, addresses all of our spiritual needs, invites us into a new, redeemed humanity and offers us the confident hope of eternal life, a life which begins now, hidden in him. Note: not hidden in other special teachings: Christ is the whole ball game, the alpha and the omega – if we come to Christ, we are *complete*. You can't improve on it or add to it – you can only go deeper and more gloriously into it. In fact, if you try to add to it, you only take away from it. If you get distracted by worshipping other spiritual beings, your faith will struggle; if you add loads of rules to the gospel of grace, you'll only put a yoke around your neck. Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light.

The reason this is so important is that the church in every generation faces the temptation to add things to the gospel. Usually, it's something in the culture which the gospel challenges. And **the only way to evaluate it is to go back to the New Testament – the apostolic faith.** How do we know what Jesus thinks about something? Go back to the New Testament: not just the gospels, but the whole New Testament, since it's only the whole New Testament which represents the complete apostolic record. So, alongside the gospels, we include the specific teachings of Peter, James, John and also Paul, whose special commissioning by Jesus came on the road to Damascus.

Yes, he was not one of the original twelve, but Peter himself accepts Paul's apostolic authority in his second letter, so that's good enough for us.

Holding on to the apostolic faith is probably under more challenge today than it has been for generations. We are more aware of all the different worldviews than we've ever been. But, actually our biggest challenge as followers of Jesus is not the other major religions, it's the diluted, sanitised faith which our modern culture wants us to accept. We're not really a secular society at all, our culture is still as 'spiritual' as it's ever been – but 350 years of so-called enlightenment (endarkenment would be better) has reduced our awe of God, and 150 years of consumerism has made spirituality all about *me*. As consumers, we're also endlessly fascinated by new inventions, so naturally we are always interested in every new spiritual invention, too. If it's new, it's probably better. The apostolic faith is always under threat, but it's no surprise that it's even more so in our current culture.

But there is good news – and what better way to end our series than by reminding ourselves that **the good news is what the good news has always been**. What Peter declared on the Day of Pentecost which planted that first extraordinary church in our reading remains the heart of our good news: 'Repent (– in other words, change your life –) and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.'

The apostolic faith – the apostolic church – teaches that true life is found in surrender to Jesus Christ, who forgives us, fills us with his Spirit, and welcomes everyone into God's family. In this Jesus, we'll find all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, a new family to join, and a cause which works tirelessly to transform the world and will one day see the resolution and renewal of all things.

This good news began with 120 people and despite no buildings, no army or human power, severe persecution and having to live largely in secret, numbered 10% of the Roman Empire by the year 300. It has survived the consistent opposition of state power and the corruption of its own human institutions. It flourishes in places where people are ignored or marginalised and yet also captures the hearts of rulers. And it does all that because, ultimately, **it's not about us. It's about Jesus**.

It's Jesus who chose us, who redeemed us, who loves us too much to let us drift and so challenges us, and ultimately who blesses us. It's Jesus who calls us to be his body, his family, reflecting his light and even his bride. And now, as Jesus' community, we seek to live uniquely as one, as set apart, as universal and finally, as committed to the faith that Jesus himself commissioned his apostles to teach us.

This, my friends, is the church. This is our identity. This is our calling. This is our good news. And may the Lord continue to add to our number daily those who are being saved, finding this amazing, life-giving news for themselves. Amen.