

Sent as Christ Was Sent

2 Corinthians 5:18–21; John 20:21–23

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Christian author and theologian Tom Wright once told the story of having lunch with his grandchildren. His grandson Leo, who was seven years old at the time, asked him at the table, 'Grandad, if God does everything, why do we need to do anything?' Leo's sister, Annabelle, who was eleven, seemed completely unconcerned by her brother's thoughtful question. Tom paused for a moment, and before he could answer, Leo asked again, 'Grandad, if God is responsible for everything, why does it matter what we do?' Tom Wright never tells us how he answered those questions. But they are good questions, aren't they? Children often ask some of the most profound questions about life and about God.

Perhaps you have asked similar questions yourself. One question I have wrestled with for many years, ever since I was a child, is this: Why did God choose to entrust the work of taking the good news of Jesus to the world to his disciples and to the Church, when we are weak, inconsistent and imperfect people? Why didn't he entrust this work to the angels? Surely they would do a much better job than we do! Or, if God is all-powerful and full of love and grace – as indeed he is – why doesn't he simply perform a miracle so that every person in the world instantly comes to know Christ?

Perhaps those questions resonate with you. Over the years, through studying the Scriptures and reflecting on God's purposes, I believe I have come to understand the answer a little more clearly. God could certainly have chosen another way if he wished. But in his wisdom he has chosen this way: he has chosen to make himself known through his people. In other words, there is no other God-appointed way by which our family, our friends, our neighbours and our community will hear the good news of Jesus unless someone tells them.

That is exactly what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 10:14: 'How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?'

There is no other way. The God-appointed means by which people come to know that God loves them, that Christ died for their sins, and that eternal life is found in him, is through the faithful witness of God's people.

That is why today we begin a new sermon series entitled ‘A Church for Others.’ The title itself reminds us of something that lies at the very heart of the Church’s identity. The Church does not exist simply for itself. It exists for the glory of God and for the sake of those who do not yet know Christ. By its very nature, therefore, the Church is a missionary Church. It is an outward-looking Church. It seeks the lost, welcomes the stranger, serves the community and faithfully proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ.

The sermon today, the first in this new series, is entitled ‘Sent as Christ Was Sent.’ Our readings from Psalm 96, 2 Corinthians 5 and John 20 all speak powerfully to this theme, although our primary focus this morning will be John 20. You will notice that the title of the sermon comes almost directly from Jesus’ own words: ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ Before we turn to John’s Gospel, however, I would like us first to consider Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 5:18–21.

In this passage Paul speaks about one of the most beautiful themes in the whole Bible – the theme of reconciliation. Reconciliation is a word we readily understand because it belongs to the world of relationships. We know the pain of broken relationships. We know what it is for friendships to fracture, for family members to become estranged, or for trust to be broken. And we also know what a wonderful thing it is when those relationships are restored. Reconciliation is something worth celebrating.

Paul tells us that through Jesus Christ, God has reconciled us to himself. Before this, our relationship with God was broken because of our sin. We were alienated from him, separated from him, and unable to restore that relationship ourselves. But God, in his grace, took the initiative. Through the perfect life, sacrificial death and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ, he dealt once and for all with the problem of sin that had separated us from him. The wonderful news of the gospel is that God has done for us what we could never have done for ourselves.

But Paul does not stop there. He goes on to say that those who have been reconciled to God have themselves been entrusted with something remarkable. We have been entrusted both with the ministry of reconciliation and the message of reconciliation. Those two expressions are closely related, but they are not quite the same. The ministry of reconciliation refers to the work God has entrusted to us – the privilege and responsibility of proclaiming Christ and calling people to be reconciled to God. The message of reconciliation is the content of what we proclaim. It is the gospel itself. Paul summarises that message beautifully in verse 21: ‘God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.’ What a remarkable privilege! God has reconciled us to himself through Christ. He has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation. And he has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation. In other words, God has made us participants in his saving mission to the world. It is precisely this same truth that Jesus now unfolds even more fully in our Gospel reading from John 20.

Now let us turn to our Gospel reading in John 20. This is one of the most beautiful and significant resurrection appearances recorded in the New Testament. The setting is enormously important. It is the evening of the very first Easter Day. Only three days earlier Jesus had been arrested, condemned, crucified and buried. The disciples had watched their Master die. Their hopes had been shattered. They were discouraged and deeply afraid.

They had gathered together in a house, and the doors were locked because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. They were probably thinking, 'If they killed Jesus, perhaps we are next.' Fear had paralysed them. They were not thinking about taking the gospel to the nations. They were simply trying to stay alive. Then something extraordinary happened. Jesus suddenly came and stood among them. In his risen and glorified body, Jesus entered the room and stood in their midst. Can you imagine their amazement? The risen Lord was with them.

The very first words Jesus spoke were these: 'Peace be with you.' Those words were a common Jewish greeting at the time. But we would completely misunderstand this passage if we thought Jesus was simply saying, 'Hello.' This peace is much deeper than an ordinary greeting. Throughout the Bible, peace is one of God's greatest gifts to his people. It is not merely the absence of conflict. It is the confidence that, whatever circumstances we may face, God is with us and God is for us.

Then Jesus showed them his hands and his side. Why did he do this? Because until that moment the disciples could scarcely believe what they were seeing. They may well have wondered whether they were seeing a spirit or an apparition. So Jesus showed them the evidence. He showed them the marks of the nails in his hands. He showed them the wound in his side where the soldier's spear had pierced him. These scars identified him beyond all doubt. This was not a ghost. This was Jesus himself.

John then records one of the most beautiful sentences in the chapter: 'The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.' Everything had changed because Jesus was alive. And it is precisely at this point that Jesus gives them their commission. He says, 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.'

These few words are among the most important words Jesus ever spoke to his disciples. Notice that Jesus does not simply say, 'I am sending you.' He says, 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' Those opening words are profoundly significant. They summarise the whole life and ministry of Jesus.

Throughout John's Gospel one of the great themes is that Jesus is the One sent by the Father. Again and again Jesus speaks of being sent. He was sent from heaven into the world. He was sent because the Father loved the world. He was sent to reveal the Father.

He was sent to proclaim the kingdom of God. He was sent to seek and save the lost. He was sent not to do his own will, but the will of the Father who sent him. He was sent to serve rather than to be served. And ultimately he was sent to give his life as a ransom for many. Everything Jesus did flowed from the fact that he had been sent by the Father. His whole life was one of loving obedience to the Father's mission.

Now comes the astonishing part. Jesus says, 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' In other words, the mission of Jesus now becomes the mission of the Church. Of course, there are important differences. We are not sent to die for the sins of the world. Only Christ could accomplish that. His saving work is unique and complete. But just as Jesus was sent into the world to reveal the Father, proclaim the good news, seek the lost, love people, serve people and bear witness to the truth, so now he sends us into the world to continue that witness in his name.

This is why Paul can later say in 2 Corinthians, 'We are therefore Christ's ambassadors.' That is a wonderful picture. Think for a moment about an ambassador. An ambassador is appointed by one nation to represent that nation in another country. He does not speak on his own authority. He represents someone greater than himself. He carries the authority of the government that has sent him. He seeks its interests. He speaks on its behalf.

Brothers and sisters, that is exactly what Christ has made us. Every Christian is an ambassador of the King of kings. Every one of us has been sent. Whether we are at home, at work, with our neighbours, or among our friends, we are Christ's representatives. We bear his name. We speak his message. We seek to reflect his character. And what an extraordinary privilege that is. The Lord Jesus Christ has chosen ordinary people like us to represent him in the world.

Now, as Jesus sends his disciples into the world, he knows exactly what lies ahead of them. He knows that the work he is giving them will not be easy. It will not simply be a human task requiring human wisdom and human strength. It is a spiritual work. It is God's work. And because it is God's work, God's people will need God's power.

That brings us to verse 22. 'And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."' This is a remarkable moment. Jesus breathing on the disciples reminds us of the creation story in Genesis 1 where God breathes life into Adam. Here in John 20 Christ breathes upon the disciples as they are God's new creation.

Some people wonder whether the disciples actually received the Holy Spirit at this moment, because in the book of Acts the Holy Spirit is poured out publicly on the Day of Pentecost. I don't think John and Luke are contradicting one another. Christ breathing the Holy Spirit on the disciples here in John 20 is symbolic and anticipatory. Jesus is preparing his disciples for what is soon to happen. Only a few weeks later, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit will come upon them in power, just as Jesus has promised.

Here, Christ assures them that they will not undertake their mission alone. The Holy Spirit will be given to them. And that is wonderfully encouraging for us. The Church has never been expected to carry out Christ's mission by its own strength. God has never said to us, 'Go and do your best.' Instead, he says, 'I will be with you.' He gives us his own Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is not merely an influence. He is the third Person of the Holy Trinity. He is fully God. He teaches us, comforts us, convicts us, strengthens us, gives us courage when we are fearful, gives us wisdom when we do not know what to say and he opens blind eyes to the truth of the gospel.

You and I cannot change a human heart. Only God's Spirit can do that. We cannot convince someone to become a Christian merely by clever arguments. We may explain the gospel clearly. We may answer people's questions thoughtfully. But ultimately it is the Holy Spirit who brings people to saving faith in Jesus Christ. That is why we should never rely merely upon our own abilities. The success of Christ's mission has never depended upon the brilliance of his servants. It depends upon the power of his Spirit. That should encourage every one of us.

Sometimes Christians hesitate to speak about Jesus because they think, 'I don't know enough.' 'I'm afraid someone will ask me a difficult question.' 'I won't know what to say.' But remember this. Jesus never asks us to convert people. That is not our job. Our responsibility is to bear faithful witness. The Holy Spirit does the work that only he can do. That is wonderfully freeing.

Then we come to the final verse in our passage, verse 23. Jesus says, 'If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.' At first glance, these words may sound rather puzzling. Some have understood them to mean that Jesus gave his disciples the authority personally to forgive sins. Historically, this verse has sometimes been used to support the practice of auricular confession, where forgiveness is understood to depend upon confession to a priest. However, that's not what Jesus is teaching here. The Bible consistently teaches that God alone forgives sins. Forgiveness belongs to God because sin is ultimately committed against God.

So what is Jesus saying? I believe the answer lies in what we have already seen in 2 Corinthians 5. God has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation and the message of reconciliation. We have not been given authority to decide who will or will not be forgiven. Only God can do that. But we have been given authority to proclaim the terms upon which forgiveness is offered. When we proclaim the gospel and someone repents and believes in Jesus Christ, we can confidently assure that person, on the authority of God's Word, that their sins have been forgiven. Not because we have forgiven them, but

because Christ has forgiven them. Likewise, if someone refuses Christ and rejects the gospel, we must honestly tell them that apart from Christ there is no forgiveness of sins.

In other words, Jesus is entrusting his Church with the solemn responsibility of proclaiming the gospel faithfully. We announce what God himself has done through Jesus Christ. And what a wonderful message we have been entrusted to proclaim!

Friends, as we reflect on what it means to be a church for others, and on Christ's call for us to be sent as he was sent, I hope you will allow the Lord to speak to you and challenge you personally. You are Christ's ambassadors. You have been entrusted with the ministry and the message of reconciliation, and you have been equipped with the Holy Spirit who dwells within you. Now, just as the Father sent Christ into the world, so Christ sends you. Therefore, let us go into this coming week with confidence, in the peace that Christ gives and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.