

- Mission Series #3: Apologetics

Clearing Away the Rubbish!

- Remember an occasion in Motherwell:
 - there was a dirty, disused piece of land next door to the primary school of which I was one of the chaplains
 - there were some ram-shackle, wrecked buildings on it
 - started to do some work on the site...
 - obviously going to be building something...
 - but what they had to do first - and it took them several weeks - was clear the site
 - apparently very little to show for their efforts for much of the time - certainly no new building!
 - only after a while did foundations start to get laid and walls start to go up
- In any construction work or other project, there needs to be a lot of preparation, of clearing away of rubbish before the "real work", building the house, whatever, can begin
- That principle often true of the process where someone comes to faith in Jesus Christ:
 - there needs to be a clearing away of rubbish, of barriers to faith, in their life
 - the barriers are often excuses that people put up, either to us as Christians or to themselves, that mean they won't consider the claims of Jesus
 - they may not always express them as questions that need to be answered, but in many ways that is what they are
- Five major areas (there are others, but these come up most):
 - 1. does God exist at all?
 - 2. if so, who is Jesus? Why do Christians regard him so highly?
 - 3. I can't believe in miracles (critically the resurrection at the heart of the Christian confession!)
 - 4 how can a loving God allow suffering?
 - 5. pluralistic world - how can we, how dare we, make claims of uniqueness and ultimacy for Jesus?
- People will express these in different ways:
 - intellectual argument;
 - distrust of the church, or ministers (you say God loves, but I've faced XYZ...);
 - for instance: the pluralism thing is expressed round here by the claim that religion is a very private thing, and we shouldn't interfere with what other people believe
 - all sorts of things!
- Barriers that hold people back from faith

What is Apologetics all About?

- This morning looking at helping clear away this kind of "rubbish", these barriers, the question marks over faith
- Down through the years a lot has been written about this kind of area - often called "Apologetics"
 - "apologia" - words against, a reasoned argument to defend your position
 - (so the title of the sermon is meant to be a joke - "don't apologise for your faith")
 - (1 Peter 3:15, 16) *"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. 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, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."*
 - ("answer" is "apologia")
- Reasoned account won't just be an intellectual argument - though some in the Christian community have that to contribute

Acts 17:1-15 Don't Apologise for your Faith!! Fintry, 24/1/2010, am

- it will also involve a life that matches our confession, not just in the sense of morals but...
 - ...if God loves us, and we are therefore secure in our own identity, that is an argument for the truth of Christianity in the face of an insecure world;
 - ...if God gives meaning, and we have endured suffering with his strength, that "speaks" of the reality of our faith;
 - ...if our neighbour seeks happiness in possession, in materialism, while we are able to give away and hold light to all that God has given us - and he is unhappy while we have contentment from God (despite poverty), then our life "speak" and apologia for Christian faith
- That kind of life is founded on two related pillars:

Scripture is the Foundation

- Start point; end point; God reveals himself, not our knowledge
- Not add to or take away from Scripture
- As we seek to argue, with lips or lives, we will always come back to Scripture
- As we seek to respond to the desire of the materialist for happiness, we will look to Scripture to see how we should live
- As we seek to respond to the person who says all faiths head in the same direction; we are all one right across the planet; you can believe what you like, since God wouldn't judge
 - we will come back to Scripture,
 - not only to refute that such a position can represent Christianity,
 - but also to see the ways in which that argument fails to hold water - no account of evil, no personality in the "God" implied, which takes away any reason for us having personalities
- So, as Paul did in Thessalonica and Berea, we will seek to ourselves work from Scripture and also draw others to read Scripture for themselves
- Scripture is a sword, able to cut to the heart of a person's life when our arguments fail:
 - (Hebrews 4:12) *"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."*

Christianity Makes Sense

- Founded on historical facts
- Example: Resurrection
 - what if he didn't die? - but professional executioners, blood & water, heavy stone...
 - what if the disciples stole body - why? prepared to die for it?
 - what if the authorities removed the body - would surely have produced it, quashed the beginning of Christianity!
 - if Jesus hadn't died; or if he did die, but the body was still available, Christianity would never have started!
 - thousands of people, in the city where the evidence was, and only days after it all happened, deciding it was true... (Acts 2:41)
- If it is all true, then - as Jesus claimed - it is the only hope for mankind, and we must take responsibility for bringing people to Christ

The Christian Apologist

- And so we will all seek, at some level or another, to give an answer to those around us, asking or watching, for the "reason for the hope that you have." (1 Peter 3:15)
- We will all be apologists!
- That will involve a number of things:

Identification

- First, identification with other people

Acts 17:1-15 **Don't Apologise for your Faith!!** Fintry, 24/1/2010, am

- Never fully possible - they aren't me, haven't gone through what I've gone through:
 - but, can try and get as close to people as we can, understand their position and perspective
 - we are not trying to win a battle, force people to admit they are wrong
 - **we are wanting to bring people to meet Jesus, not shout at them for being wrong!**
- Jesus came all the way from heaven to earth in part to identify with people; he didn't shout advice or send a newscast on TV
 - rather, he came as one of us. He lived our life, ate our food, shared our limitations and died our death
 - that gave him every right to be heard, since he knew our condition from the inside
- Christians are often unlike their Master in this regard
- We live in a little ghetto:
 - most of our friends are Christians;
 - many of our activities are Christian, or with Christians;
 - sometimes we can feel uncomfortable in the places most people feel most comfortable - in the pub, at the footie if the language is a bit colourful, ...
 - and our activities can seem very, very strange to the outsider!
 - for instance, church: all facing the same way, me talking you listening, standing up for songs, communal singing, shutting eyes for prayers...
 - it is weird! Only our familiarity has dulled that feeling amongst us!
- And we expect people to come to us, to where we hang out, to what we do, when they want to talk about God!!
 - when Jesus left heaven and came to us, when his final command to us was to **"go"...**
 - so while we must do all in our power to minimise the cultural things that make church (and therefore God) seem strange...
 - we must go further, and identify, get alongside, share life with people who don't yet know Jesus for themselves

Investigation

- As we identify with people, we allow them to get to know us
- But we need also to get to know them - especially what makes them tick!
- What do they believe?
- Quite common to work alongside people for years, and never discover what folk think about life, the universe and everything!
 - (me at EPCC!)
- We need to work at listening - so we aren't simply trying to explain the faith in the same way to John as we did to Jane, when they are different people

Provocation

- As we get to know people, and understand what makes them tick, we will want to provoke them to think
- Help them to question their own assumptions - the first stage of rubbish clearing
- Wanting to help people to ask questions of themselves - **"I wonder if I am right about this?"**
 - generally best to be gentle, for otherwise we will hurt people when they are vulnerable, and only leave them alienated
- **We will ask provocative, insightful questions:**
 - maybe by **asking people about their values, what they hope to achieve in life** - and we will only be able to do that if we are friends, trusted, who have identified with them, who they know care about them and understand them to a point
 - **maybe our lifestyle** - generosity in the face of poverty, peace in the face of pain, whatever - will provoke those same questions
 - **(another SU camp story - leader asked by children how much they were paid to come and give the kids a good holiday - answer, nothing, indeed they'd paid to come...!)**

- Michael Green, one of the writers I've found helpful as I've been thinking about this series, narrates two stories about Francis Schaeffer, a Christian apologist in the 50's and 60's:
 - Schaeffer arguing with a young man who claimed that all moral values were relative, and that free sex was OK. So Schaeffer asked him for his girlfriends address and phone number! The man was furious, until he realised that the logical implication of his position was one he didn't like when turned against himself and someone he loved!
 - on another occasion, Schaeffer was arguing with an anarchist - advocated violence! So Schaeffer and friends grabbed him, held him down, took a cudgel and asked him why, on his own presuppositions, Schaeffer should not simply beat his brains out! The man quickly abandoned his anarchism, because he had felt in his own person, his own fear, its utter inadequacy
- Schaeffer forced people, most often gently, to question their direction, and showed up the emptiness of their lives:
 - like tearing the leaky roof off a house so it can be fixed properly

Translation

- We will not simply help folk begin to question their beliefs and assumptions, **but will seek to translate the Christian gospel into their situation**
- Words: the cross, the resurrection, Jesus (swear word - SS kid in Motherwell told her teacher that Mr Brough shouldn't swear in church!); never mind anything like redeemed, salvation, sin!
 - we, living in our ghetto, and often having done our own language learning as youngsters, forget how incomprehensible it all is!
 - (one of the most refreshing things any group of Christians can have is non-Christians or new Christians among them, asking the "huh?!" questions!!)
- Kind of words too - we think abstractly, about concepts, like salvation, even mission!
 - most people don't!
 - they talk very concretely, with examples!
 - that's what they are used to hearing
- So we will work at finding ways of communicating that make sense to the folk we are with
 - Alpha... Start! course... etc

Relation

- Relate that translated gospel to their felt need, so that their real need is met too
 - someone who fears death may not think much of arguments about the existence of God, but may gasp with joy at evidence pointing to death defeated in the resurrection
 - a lonely person is most likely to be struck by the friendship of Jesus to the outcast, like Nicodemus, Zacchaeus, or the Samaritan woman

Conclusion

- So let's be apologists:
 - not those who apologise for their faith, but those who back their faith up with reasons;
 - whose lives match their profession
- That we might answer people's questions, provoke them into considering Christ's claims
- We will not, in so doing, bring people to faith
- But we will be helping to clear away the rubbish that prevents them from coming to faith