

God was in Christ ¹

The sermon given by Professor John Sawkins at the Rosyth Methodist Church service of Morning Worship on the occasion of the 109th Church Anniversary, the Sunday before Lent, 2 March 2025.

The readings were: Matthew 8:18–20; Matthew 15:1–17; 2 Corinthians 5:11–21.



From the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 5 and verse 19:

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”

Moving and Travelling

Most of us move house from time to time. And I think moving house comes pretty near the top of the list of the most stressful things to do in life. It's no wonder. All that preparation. All that packing. The redirection of mail. The sorting out of gas and electricity and broadband. The wrench of leaving old neighbours. And then the move and the job of unpacking things again.

Now, if you are like us, you perhaps still have things you packed into boxes that, ten years later, you haven't quite got around to unpacking. And of course you ask yourself, if you haven't unpacked it, or looked at it in ten years, do you really need it? We tend to build up a lot of stuff over the years.

So moves are often the times when we have to think about which bits of this 'stuff', or baggage, we need to bring with us to our new location, and what can safely be left behind.

And I reckon there were debates, back in 1934 when the old Parkgate Church was opened, or back in 1970 when this building was opened – perhaps heated debates – over what to bring from the old church to the new, and what to do with the rest. What were the essentials? And what to leave behind?

As a Church we know we have a lot of baggage – some physical and some historical – and it's good to find ways of getting rid of some of it. Which brings me rather neatly to a story you may have heard from me before, about the friend of a senior church leader, who had to take a flight from Paris to Kennedy Airport in New York.

It was winter and the weather in New York had been so bad that all the planes out of Paris were late. When he got one from the front at the check-in, the man was upset to see the person in front of him being very rude to the check-in person and giving her an incredibly hard time. When it was his turn, he said to her how sorry he was that the previous passenger had been so rude, and how on earth did she stay so patient with him?

¹ Sources for this sermon include: Donald Baillie, *To Whom Shall We Go* (St Andrew Press, 1955), John Stott *The Authentic Jesus: A response to current scepticism in the church* (Marshalls, 1985 & 1992; IVP USA, 1985).





And she said to him, “Well sir, I shouldn’t really tell you this. There’s sort of bad news and good news.

“The bad news is that he’s sitting next to you on the flight to New York.

“But the good news is I’ve sent his luggage to Hong Kong!”

We could do with people like that in every Church – organising for some of our baggage to go elsewhere.

But, as those of us who have ever been unfortunate enough to be separated from our luggage know, there are some pieces which are absolutely essential. The rucksack with your passport and tickets. The case with the sponge bag containing your regular medication for the next fortnight. There are some things we can’t do without.

So my question this morning, as a Christian Church, what are the essential pieces of baggage that we, as people who follow Christ, need?

The Bible

The first piece of baggage is an absolute essential for us. The Bible, God’s Word.

We believe the Bible is not merely a record of events far back in human history, but a means by which God continues to speak to us and our situation today.

How many times do you listen to a very well-known Bible reading in church, and hear for the first time something completely new? How many times have you suddenly thought – that reading is for me; that reading is for the point in life where I am now.

The Bible, we believe, is not merely God’s written word for people alive thousands of years ago. It is God’s living Word – for us, now.

Christ

And now to the second piece of baggage, and that is faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

We believe in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Is that an essential for us – for our Church? Why might we pause for thought?

First, we are making pretty big claims.

We are claiming that Almighty God, the creator of heaven and earth, Being’s source, the first and last, lived in an obscure backwater of the Roman empire, that he was executed and then seen by people who had known him after he had died.

And that’s not all. We are claiming that Jesus is the son of God – and we know that will be offensive to some people.

And we are claiming he died, but rose again from death. We know that will turn off the scientific sceptics and agnostics.

Above all, it’s all so specific. We are claiming that Christ is the mediator between human beings and God (1 Timothy 2:5). And we are claiming that his death and resurrection puts us right with God (Acts 4:12).

This is a difficult piece of baggage to bring with us. But **we must insist**.

Now I know that the simplest thing is to leave it behind. It works in politics. Alastair Campbell put it most pithily in his phrase “We don’t do God.” Why didn’t Alastair Campbell wish God to be ‘done’ by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair? Because in politics in the UK if you do ‘do God’ you give the impression that you are a fruit cake, and you come across as being arrogant and high-handed. Better to leave it out. Don’t do God.

Should we take a leaf out of his book and declare as a church, for the sake of inter-faith and civic engagement, that we ‘don’t do Christ’?





Tempting, isn't it? We have a building to work in and to pay for. We want to build meaningful, deep and sincere relationships with people of all faiths and none. And we need to fill all our rooms and we need to fund all that we do ... and wouldn't it be just easier and more pragmatic and safe to leave Jesus Christ in the background?

Listen, all our conversations would be so much more pleasant and uncontroversial if we avoided the scandal of particularity – Jesus Christ. We could plant ourselves in the moderate centre ground. Safe, reassuring, talk in a warm and unspecific way about God. So much nicer when we need to build bridges in the neighbourhood.

Sorry, but **no**. This is an **essential**.

We are *Christian* people. We follow Christ. We worship Christ. We preach Christ. We offer Christ to others.

Christ, who was fully human and fully God.

Christ, who died to demonstrate the depth of God's love for us all.

Christ, whose resurrection showed that physical death was not an end, but a door to eternal life in the nearer presence of God.

If we leave this behind, what distinguishes us? We are just another group of people meeting together once a week at the weekend, and during the week filling our building with users. There are plenty more rival outfits who will do that.

We have something else to offer – we offer Christ.

And more than that, we believe that what we know and say about Christ is not just true, but is good news.

And that was also Paul's view when he wrote to the Corinthian church.

Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians

In his second letter Paul refers to a rather painful visit he had made, which had strained his relations with the church. It's clear that some members of the church had attacked Paul. But equally clear is that he had been robust – we would say blunt – in defence.

He didn't mince his words. And that was a source of concern and even pain to him. So he defends himself, assures the church of his love and concern for them all. But above all he reminds them of the central message of the gospel which had so completely turned his life around.

And what was the nub of it all?

Before Paul had become a follower of Christ he had been a devout believer, and he sincerely tried his very best to win God's favour by faithfully keeping his commandments; making himself into a 'good person'. But he never felt that he was succeeding in becoming good, and so he could not manage to earn God's love. And then he discovered something so astonishing that his life was turned upside down – in a good way.

When he began to follow Christ, he found out that he didn't need to earn God's love. God loved him already, while he was still a sinner.

This was the great discovery of the New Testament – that God loves us before we have begun to be worthy of His love. He loves not only good people, but bad people. He loves us whilst we are still sinners. The 'lightbulb' moment for Paul was when he discovered that,

"God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" ... and it astonished him.





That, in a nutshell, is the good news.

God loves us, good and bad and indifferent.

God loves us whilst we are still sinners.

There is nothing we can do to earn this love. And that might cause us to despair. But we believe our relationship with God is not doomed to fail because we fail. It can be put right – we can be put right with God – when we put our faith, our trust, in Jesus Christ.

And if our relationship with God is put right – if we choose to follow Christ – reconciliation and healing of personal relationships and an enriching of our own lives can be made real, not in some distant and far-off heaven, but here and now.

Throughout its history, this church congregation, wherever it has met, had offered not just rooms to let and a place to meet.

This church congregation has offered good news that opens up the possibility of new beginnings for everyone, whoever they are, whatever their circumstances are, whatever age or stage of life they are at.

So as you, as we, step into a new year as a church congregation, let us resolve to live out in mission and service the good news of Jesus Christ,

in the way in which we welcome people,

the way in which we treat people,

the way in which we respect people,

the way in which we build people up,

the way in which we forgive people,

and perhaps most of all, the ways in which we tell people that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”

Thanks be to God for his great love in Christ. Amen.

For the service, Professor Sawkins chose four hymns that had been used at the services for the opening of Parkgate in 1936 and the stone-laying of our present church in 1970:

“O for a thousand tongues to sing”
(StF 364)

“O God of Bethel by whose hand”
(StF 475)

“This, this is the God we adore” (StF 67)

“Now thank we all our God” (StF 81)

His all-age address (“The first word”) was on the topic of Baggage, with a packed suitcase illustrating both essentials (like the Bible) and unnecessary extras best left behind, and was followed by the hymn:

“Moses, I know you’re the man,
the Lord said (StF 473)

The photograph of a man holding a suitcase is by Mantas Hesthaven and is made available by Unsplash.