

Session 1

The Apostolic Period

There is something missing in the Church's record of its own history. It is the period from the death of Jesus and his resurrection (around 33CE) to the first letter of St **Paul** (around 50CE).

We know, from accounts in his letters and from the *Acts of the Apostles*, that Paul was converted possibly around 36CE but the first Christian written record accepted as authentic¹ is his *First Letter to the Thessalonians*.

That means a gap of 17 years when the Church was evidently growing and people were sharing Jesus' life and teachings, but no written record remains.

What happened in those years?

We know something from *Acts*, and we know something from Paul's later letters.

The first Christians were persecuted² and many had fled Jerusalem. Across the empire, mostly in port cities³, Christians lived uncomfortably with Jewish people: some Christians attended synagogue, whilst others were expelled for insisting that Jesus was the *messiah* for whom his people had been waiting.

Paul himself had been sent out as part of a more rigorous persecution ordered by the religious authorities in Jerusalem, to track down followers of Jesus.⁴ Clearly these early Christians⁵ were visible enough and problematic enough to warrant persecution, as they would find again and again in the centuries to follow.

The message of Jesus was something preached, not something written: people came to believe because of what they heard, but also from the example of the lives of Christians. No record was made during the life of Jesus, so what we have are three things:

- we have some elements of what, it appears, Jesus actually said⁶

¹ Authenticity (see **Setting the Ground**) is the work of discernment by the Church. Those texts considered authentic are included in the *Canon* of the New Testament, the list of texts you'll find in your Bible

² See, for example, Acts 5:17. In fact persecution didn't really end until the emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313CE which granted religious toleration to all religions in the empire

³ The Mediterranean is best thought of as a highway *connecting* rather than a sea separating cities. The port cities were therefore the main links across the empire

⁴ See Acts 9:1-2

⁵ See Acts 11:26 which records that it was in Antioch that 'the disciples were first called Christians'

⁶ Jesus, it is known, spoke in Aramaic, a local middle Eastern dialect. There are phrases - especially in the three 'synoptic' gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) which echo one another and so seem to have relied on similar sources - which seem Aramaic in origin, rather than Greek (the language in which the texts were written)

- we have stories about what Jesus did
- we have the parables - these are such unusual stories that they seem to have come from Jesus himself⁷

The letters of Paul⁸ are all dated before the first of the gospel texts (thought to be Mark which was probably written just after 70CE).

This is the first 'period' of the Church following the death of Jesus - it is the time of the apostles, of early persecutions.

What can we know about this early Church?

We know:

- that there were many Christian communities, mostly scattered around the eastern Mediterranean⁹
- that there were many preachers of the message of Jesus - not all of them authentic¹⁰
- that the first Christian communities were very small - probably fewer than twenty or thirty people¹¹ and that they met in people's homes
- that some were Jewish converts and others were converts from paganism¹².
- that the *meaning* of Jesus' life, death and teachings was open to question: right from the start, people disagreed about *who* Jesus was, *what* his teachings meant, and *what* was the meaning and truth about his death and resurrection.

The Faith of the Apostolic Period

Who was the Jesus proclaimed in the earliest years of the Church?

Who was the God in whom the Christians believed?

Who did they believe themselves to be? What questions faced them?

In the next session we will begin to look at the texts which have come down to us from that time but let us, first, use our imagination: our common humanity can help us gain an

⁷ They were particularly precious to the early Christians because they were easy to remember, yet contained the key elements of their faith

⁸ 1 Thessalonians (c. 50CE), Galatians (c. 53CE), 1 Corinthians (c. 53-54CE), Philippians (c. 55CE), Philemon (c. 55CE), 2 Corinthians (c. 55-56CE) and Romans (c.57CE) - these are generally considered authentic letters of Paul; other texts, whilst still canonical, are of disputed authorship or are considered to have been authored by others in Paul's name. This might shock us today, but it was not considered necessarily unusual or deceptive at the time

⁹ These are witnessed in the first letters, in the Acts of the Apostles and Book of Revelation, and also in archaeological evidence

¹⁰ We know this from both Christian and non-Christian sources, including Acts

¹¹ Evidence drawn from the early letters, from Acts and from archaeological sites

¹² From the dispute leading to the Council of Jerusalem 50CE - see Acts 15 and Galatians 2:1-10

insight into how these first Christians might have felt and what they might have believed, and why.

Let us go back to the beginning.

Not, perhaps, the beginning you will expect: not the beginning of the gospel story as we have it, and the birth of Jesus, but - rather - to the **resurrection**.

You see, the story didn't begin for the first Christians with the tale of a humble birth in Bethlehem: it began with an experience.

We do not know what this experience was. We give it a name - resurrection - and countless pages have been written about its meaning.

What we do know is that it was the definitive event for the first Christians: it was what changed everything.

We can't know directly what happened; nor can we fully grasp its meaning.

When Jesus rose from the dead, it was something *utterly different* from anything the disciples (or indeed *anyone*) had ever known: Jesus didn't just *come back to life* - as Lazarus did.¹³ Nor was he some kind of *spirit* or *ghost*: he was completely present in the upper room *both alive and dead*.¹⁴

The gospel writers, and Paul too - as we'll see in the next session - understood Jesus in differing ways.¹⁵ It is the experience of Jesus risen that defines Christianity for the centuries which follow, all the way to our own.

The Texts

Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you - unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received:

that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also

¹³ Jn 11

¹⁴ That's why the marks of death were on his body, and why, as we see in the Book of Revelation, he is described as the 'lamb who was slain who lives forever'

¹⁵ Matthew (Jesus as the fulfilment of God's Promise); Mark (Jesus as prophet, preacher and teacher), Luke (Jesus as healer), and John (Jesus as God's ultimate expression of God). The experience of the risen Christ on the Damascus road was fundamental to Paul's preaching of Jesus

to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them - though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it. After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.

Mark 16:9-14

These are among the earliest texts on the resurrection of Jesus. Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, seems to be recounting a *statement of faith* - or creed - which has been passed down to him from the church in Jerusalem and the first witnesses to the resurrection.

What differences and similarities do you notice?

Reflection

What have been your feelings as you have reflected on the Church of the Apostles? Do you feel reassured by the 'many voices' of the earliest witness, or are you troubled?

If you were to write your own account of Jesus, what do you think would be the most important things you would want to say and remember?

How do you imagine Jesus, both during his lifetime and in his resurrection? Is there something you could write, or draw, to help remind you of this image?