

Lent 2
1/3/2026

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 15:1-6

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Relief

ForeWord

In one of our Lenten study groups this week, the question was asked about the continuing relevance of Christian faith: why do so many no longer consider Christian faith to be “relevant” to their lives?

There is a bit of a thing in the church sometimes which seeks to dismiss relevance as an appropriate criterion for thinking about faith, but it is kind of important. It helps here to know that when we ask about relevance, we are in fact asking about *relief*. The two words are very closely related: something is relevant to me to the extent that it relieves a tension or perceived threat. Relevance is not about affirming me or any position that I might take on an issue; it’s about what might be necessary for me to improve the life that I am living. Something is relevant if it *helps*; it is *irrelevant* if it does not.

To the extent that this is true, it answers our enquiry about why so many people find Christian confession irrelevant: it quite simply does not seem to help. And our lives are full enough with worries and things to do without adding to them things that just don’t help. Important here is what we think it is against which we struggle, and for which something like faith (or maybe just having more money) might seem to be helpful – relieving – or not.

Our Lenten study (Sam Wells’s *Power and Passion*) is a study of the political dynamics around the trial, sentencing and execution of Jesus. Last week we considered the figure of Barabbas. Most of you will recall that the Roman governor, Pilate, offered Barabbas as a get-out-of-jail-free swap for Jesus, although the crowd chose Barabbas over Jesus.

Wells assumes that Barabbas is a member of the Zealot movement which struggled violently against the Roman occupation. Wells locates the Zealot revolutionism as one possible response to the presence of the Romans, but there were other options. *Collaborationists* like the royal family and the tax collectors found another way, enjoying a certain safety at the cost of their compatriots. *Reformers* saw the presence of the Romans as divine punishment, and sought a return to basics in religious practice; the Pharisees fall into this group. The Essenes represented another approach, that of *withdrawal* into a separate, pure, holy space.

Recognising these different political factions and positions helps us to understand what’s at stake in many of the exchanges and conflicts in the Gospels. The opposition to Rome, and to Jesus himself, taps into these stances. But collaboration, reform, withdrawal and revolution are not how we deal with political oppression only. Oppression is just one form of the more generalised concept of *suffering*, and each of those four responses to the Roman presence in Palestine in Jesus’ time could be made to any source or threat of suffering in our lives at any particular time.

We have life-denying forces operating around us with the potential to impact upon our lives negatively all the time and, in response to these, we can take stances very much like collaboration, puritan withdrawal and rebellion. And in each case, we understand our response to be one of relevance, or relief. If we can’t remove the oppressive

influence or threat – if we can't get rid of our metaphorical Romans – the next best thing is to find a way of living with it, and this is a matter of discovering what offers the most relief. What is relevant – what brings or promises relief – might be getting the right education, or moving to the right suburb, leveraging market forces, escaping into drink or drugs, short-term-till-love-runs-out relationships, or consuming triple-choc-chip ice-cream by the bucket. All such things are “relevant”, relieving in some way; we do such things because they “help”.

If this is what relevance means, it brings us to a different assessment of the relevance of Christian confession. To say that it seems to be irrelevant to most people today is to say that other things are thought to be *more* relevant, to bring greater relief, when it comes to considering the kinds of challenges, threats, and oppressive influences that are operating all the time around us. What is turning to God in prayer in contrast to escaping into binge-watching a whole Netflix season in one night? What is the promise of eternal life compared to a gold-level health insurance policy? At the same time, what is binge-watching but withdrawal, an insurance policy but collaboration? The world Wells describes is our own world, even if ours *looks* a little less “religious”.

But Wells' critique of zealotry is that while it senses that something is badly wrong with the oppression, the revolutionary solution is too narrow. The insurrectionist wants simply to overthrow the government and replace it with a different government, imagining not least that violent means can secure non-violent ends. For all of the change that our various revolutions and democratic elections have attempted in our societies over the last two thousand years, not very much has changed. We recognise our situation and our options in the situation and options of Jesus' time. We still struggle to identify what is relevant, what will bring relief.

And we would have to say this of the other responses to the suffering going on around us, whether collaboration with the powers, or personal reform, or withdrawal. In each of these responses, we end up reinforcing the problem, rather than coming to grips with its true nature and what it might take to overcome it – what it might take to live justly within an ineluctably unjust world. And I'm sorry for saying “ineluctably” here (because, who says that! ?), but I just couldn't think of a better word: it is the “can't get out of it” which is important. We can't get out of the system with its many sufferings and threats by means of collaboration or reform or withdrawal or violent overthrow. The burden remains.

And this finally brings us to our focus Scripture text today, taken from Paul's letter to the Romans. Behind this text is Paul's concern to emphasise that there is nothing we can do to relieve ourselves of our fundamental burdens, and he draws on the experience of the patriarch Abraham, who impresses God not by what he does, but by his “faith”

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: Romans 4.1-5, 13-17)

Word: Proclamation

Up to this point in the letter, Paul's been at pains to demonstrate how everyone is under oppression, although his interest is not the oppression of the Romans in Palestine, or geopolitical oppression at all. The oppression he describes is the oppression of sin. By sin, he means an alienation from God, which is just as much an alienation from ourselves. And the pressing question is, What is it that can relieve us in these circumstances? The simple answer, and the common one, is broadly “the law”. The solution to sin is not sinning – is doing the “right thing” – as the very idea of law seems to suggest might be possible.

But Paul has also worked very hard to demonstrate that the law doesn't help here; it's part of the problem. We are forced into continual vigilance, acquiescence, or anxiety about where we stand before God. When you start with sin, you end with sin. This is similar to the outcome of the various responses that Sam Wells describes could be made to the oppression of the Romans, or more generally to any oppression we might experience. To collaborate, or to withdraw into self-reform, or to withdraw altogether from the oppressed space into some holier place, or to look for violent revolution – each of these allows the oppression to determine what the relief looks like. And so it's never quite relief, none of these responses is ever quite relevant; we take the oppressive thing with us.

Paul's point is that while the law might be pertinent to the question of sin, it is not relevant. And it's because of this that he clings to the concept of faith, which he does see as properly relevant, relieving. Faith is not here the fairly shallow conviction that God exists; Paul's interest is in what relieves – what is relevant – and God's mere existence doesn't relieve anything. Put differently, the question is, What sets Abraham free? Because Paul's account of Abraham is an account of a *relieved* man.

What sets Abraham free, or relieves him, is nothing that Abraham himself does. Most of us know that Paul contrasts faith and action in his thinking about salvation. But the contrast between faith and action is that the faith is so *large*, we might say, that faith is basically what God does, and not what Abraham does. We might push the language to breaking point here by saying that God *faiths* Abraham. Abraham's faith is as much something which happens *to* him as it is his own act.

In the passage we've heard this morning, Paul says this in three different ways, each an overlapping description of the kind of God we have according to what this god does: first, this is the God who justifies the ungodly; second, this is the God who raises the dead to life; and, third, this is the God who calls into being things which do not exist.

Justification, resurrection, creation: these are all substantially the same thing. One looks like moral forgiveness, another looks like a nature miracle and the third looks like a theory about the beginning of all things but, in each case, what is happening is a radical undercutting of the conditions already in place in order that life might be experienced, in order that relief might be known.

Relief is not a thing we do, not a method, not a process, not a response in terms of the system. Justification of the ungodly sets the rules aside, abandoning the self-help game; the dead have no capacities, let alone to raise themselves; and the nothing from which we are created has no potential to bring us forth. In each case, what oppresses – sin, death, nothingness – is set aside as *irrelevant*. There is no life, no relief, here. Faith is seeing this dynamic: that nothing comes out of sin, death and the void by our own power; we cannot make ourselves whole.

The question of relevance, then, is a question of how adequate the relief is we work up for ourselves, compared to relief which comes from the kind of faith Paul speaks of. Or, to put it as a statement, Christian faith is not relevant to many of us because we are pursuing the wrong kind of relevance. And I mean many of *us*, because we are here today for relevance, but we are here for relief from the types of relevance the world proposes. We are here because life demands of us collaboration with darkness, constantly requires of us that we be better, tempts us to run away from it all, or just to smash what is in our way. We see this all around us all the time, and we know there's no lasting relief in any of it. The next thing we do on these terms will not save us, make us whole, set us right.

We can't make ourselves, Paul says. We must rather *receive* ourselves, as if raised from the dead, as if created again out of nothing. Only this will relieve, will bring rest – a table set in the presence of treat and danger, as one of the psalmists once sang.

Come to me, Jesus once said. Come, those who are weary from carrying heavy burdens, for I am *relev-ant*. Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in spirit, and you will find relief for your souls.

Justification, resurrection, creation: this is God's gift in an unjust, dying, nothing-ed world.

Whatever else life might demand of us, let us receive this gift, that we not be overwhelmed, and that we might become to others a small glimmer of light, of relief, in the darkness.
