

One of the more striking things about the letters of St. Paul is the way that he regularly refers to the content of his preaching as “gospel.” Sometimes he calls it “the gospel of God,” at other times “the gospel of Christ,” and occasionally simply “my gospel.” In none of these cases is he referring to what we call the gospels, nor could he because they were not written until after Paul’s death. When he uses the word gospel he means simply good news, good news from and about God and Jesus Christ.

Today’s reading from the letter to the Ephesians as well as the reading from John can help explain why Paul put the emphasis in his preaching where he did. It is an emphasis, I believe, that should mark what we all understand about and experience of our religion.

“God, who is rich in mercy,” today’s reading from Ephesians begins, “out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” Echoing that same conviction, John affirms that “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Life is not always easy; in fact, for many it is at times enormously challenging. That is particularly true for those who have to confront war, violence,

extreme poverty, or serious sickness. Nor can we forget its everyday challenges, challenges related to family life or work, to personal relationships or struggles with things like racism, sexism and all the other prejudices to which different groups among are exposed.

To speak of “good news” as descriptive of the heart of our faith, is not to deny the very real difficulties that are a part of life; nor is it meant to foster a naïve optimism. Christianity has always encouraged a realistic approach to life and its challenges. What the phrase “good news” points to is something more fundamental. It has to do with the ultimate meaning of our life and of all life.

The book of Genesis teaches in its own popular and poetic way that all things ultimately come from God and are dependent on him. We and the world only exist because God chose to call us into existence, chose to give us, as it were, a share in his being and in his life. Because it comes from him, all of creation, including human life, is declared in Genesis to be “very good.” The book, however, goes on to underline the presence of evil in the world. People refuse to accept their creaturely status, turn against God and one another, and reject the way of peace and cooperation.

When today's gospel speaks of Jesus being lifted up, it is pointing to both his being lifted up on the cross and his being lifted up from death to life in the resurrection. It is above all through the death and resurrection of Jesus that God offers us forgiveness and reconciliation and the possibility for a new and renewed life, a life anchored in him and in his gifts.

Both of today's readings emphasize the importance of faith. It is by faith that we recognize the good news for what it is and become open to what it promises. For John and Paul and for the whole of the New Testament, faith is much more than an assent of the mind to certain things as true. It engages the whole person, mind and heart, body and soul. Genuine faith is inseparable from hope and trust. To believe in God is, among other things, to trust in his presence and in his promises.

If faith thus defines our fundamental religious stance, it is meant to spill over and to have an effect on the way we live. The passage we read a moment ago from Ephesians says that God has created us in Christ Jesus for good works. This, it adds, is the way of life to which God calls us. In another letter Paul affirms that "the only thing that counts is faith working through love," faith becoming

active in the world through what we do and how we live. In John's Gospel Jesus says: "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you."

Christianity is first and last good news, good news above all about what God has done for us in Christ. This, Paul insists, is pure grace; it is the result not of anything we have done but of God's graciousness to us, of his love for us. The only possible positive response to such a message is one of faith, trust, and love. They more than anything else should be the distinguishing features of anyone who desires to be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus.