

Reflecting on the Resurrection – St. Paul

‘Breakfast and the Bible’

1 Corinthians 15:3-23

We’ve celebrated the Resurrection of Jesus – admittedly in a rather different way this year! Yet the truth of the message of Easter still speaks to us in our current situation, perhaps in new ways. As the Church grew, key apostles started to write to the fledgling churches to help them become more familiar with the teachings of Jesus and how to apply them. Key amongst these were Peter, James, John and Paul. Indeed, their writings make up most of the New Testament. So let’s see what each of them has to say as they reflected back on the momentous events of that first Easter. We finish with Paul, who wrote far more extensively than the others, and especially on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. A key passage on this most important of subjects is to be found in what we know as his First Letter to the Corinthians. Here we look at 1 Cor. 15: 3-23.

1 Corinthians 15:3-23

Corinth was, in many ways, a truly great city of its time. It was renowned as a centre for commerce and trading, with good maritime and land connections. It was a crossroads for important trade routes to the north, south, east and west. Because of geography, they all had to pass through her. As often happens, such wealth brought with it decadence and lax morals, in every area of life. It was home to the great temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, with its hundreds of priestesses, who were basically sacred prostitutes. In Roman times, Corinth became a colony of strategic importance, the regional capital for most of modern-day Greece. The population was very mixed: Romans, Greeks, Phoenicians, Phrygians and people from the east. Amongst all these were Jews, trying to keep under the radar with their monotheistic beliefs.

On one of his missionary journeys, Paul spent 18 months in Corinth (Acts 18:1-17), living with Aquila and Priscilla. As was his usual model, he started by preaching in the synagogue, with early fruitfulness, but resistance from some sections of the Jewish community gradually grew and he had to move on. The gospel therefore reached both Jews and non-Jews. Paul had a close care for the church in Corinth, even after he had moved on to other places, and wrote several letters, of which we only have two. For example, in 1 Cor. 5:9 he refers to a previous letter. He had heard that matters were getting out of hand. There were huge blessings which were powerful manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit, for example, but which some were starting to twist into demonstrating their claim to be superior Christians. There were factions, based around different personalities. Amongst all this were immoral practices, at odds with the moral teaching of Christ. Which is why Paul probably needed, in the letter we know as 1 Corinthians, to close it with an emphatic re-statement of the centrality of the physical resurrection to the Christian faith.

Verses 3-11

- What Paul turns to now is of 'first importance'. In other words, take notice especially closely here!
- Jesus, the Christ (the Anointed One) died for our sins, was buried and raised and then appeared to witnesses – hundreds of them! Lastly, he appeared to Paul, whom he regards as the least worthy of such grace. But Paul responds by working harder than all of them! This is probably true, given where Paul had come from in terms of faith and standing in society.
- Amongst those named who saw the risen Jesus are Cephas (Peter) who denied him, the Twelve (including Thomas who doubted him) and James (probably the Lord's brother) who misunderstood him – along with the rest of his human family, it appears. And finally to Paul, who had been actively persecuting the followers of Jesus. The fact that Jesus bears no grudges but appears to those who deny, doubt, misunderstand and persecute him is surely an encouragement to all of us?!
- ***As we continue to celebrate Easter, let us once again acknowledge when we have, like the Corinthians, allowed our focus on the resurrection of Jesus to become obscured by other aspects of our lives. Let us embrace the fact that he gives us a way back into fellowship with him, as he did for Peter (John 21:15-19), the Twelve (John 20:19-23), Thomas (John 20:24-29) and Paul (Acts 9:1-22).***

Verses 12-19

- Paul lays it on the line! Why doubt the physical resurrection of Jesus? By doing so, the Corinthians are emptying their beliefs and message of all power. Without the physical resurrection, the foundation on which our faith stands, then everything else that we cherish falls down and the word of Scripture is exposed as a lie.
- The logic of all that would be that those who believe in Jesus and are part of the church are more to be pitied than all – because they have been hoodwinked! All their efforts would be in vain and there would be no hope for those who have died, nor for those still alive.
- Why is Paul so emphatic about this – very 'black and white'? Because the resurrection proves (i) that truth is stronger than falsehood, (ii) that good is stronger than evil, (iii) that love is stronger than hatred and (iv) that life is stronger than death (cf. Song of Solomon 8:6-7).
- I read of a true story during the Blitz in London in WW2. In a certain church in the city, preparations were made to celebrate Harvest Festival, with a sheaf of corn at its centrepiece. However, the service never happened, for on the Saturday night, a bomb hit the church and destroyed it. It was only the following Spring that someone noticed, amongst the rubble, that there were green shoots. As the summer went on these grew and grew and, by the autumn there were many ripened ears of corn. That is what God does in the ruins of our lives! For all our times of turning away from him, and quenching the work of his Spirit in our lives, he doesn't give up, but by his grace allows the seeds of his love to sprout and bear fruit that will bless others and give glory to him.

Let us pray that the seeds of the gospel of love will continue to take root amongst the 'rubble' of our lives and bring much (and perhaps surprising) fruitfulness in the future.

Verses 20-23

- On the morning of Easter Day, two things became abundantly clear: the tomb was empty and Jesus was seen. Had the authorities stolen the body? In which case, when the followers of Jesus started to claim that he was alive again, all they had to do was to produce it. Had the disciples stolen the body? In which case, why did so many of them choose martyrdom because of their faith if they knew that it was all based on a hoax? Had Jesus just gone into a deep coma, and came back to consciousness in the tomb? But how on earth would he be able even to walk, let alone push aside a huge stone door, after all the beatings he endured, not to mention the crucifixion with its wounds and loss of blood? The only credible alternative is that he really did rise again physically. No wonder Paul says, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead..." (20).
- Paul goes to speak of something so profound that it takes a lifetime of Christian discipleship to work it out: just as Adam (the original 'man') rebelled against God and cast the die for humanity's woes ever since, so one man, Jesus, has undone all that. Thankfully, we do not need to understand that fully in order to receive the benefits of Christ's once-for- eternity work on the cross. Christ was the first to enter into resurrected glory, but we who 'belong to Christ' (23) will do so too. The whole point of this Chapter in this letter, and in other passages, notably in his letter to the Romans, is that we are called upon to have faith in the efficacy of what Jesus accomplished on the cross in order to belong to Christ. Hallelujah!

As his life came towards its end, in a prison in Rome, Paul's faith in the resurrection of Jesus must have been tested. He could have easily convinced himself that it was all a hoax, agreed to worship the Emperor, secured his freedom, and led a tranquil life in his later years as a Roman citizen. That he did not, but died as a martyr, shows that what he believed about the resurrection of Jesus, he lived out. That, I guess, is the big challenge to us, especially when people mock us for being Christians, or when we go through suffering and doubt. These things are to be expected. So Paul, at the close of 1 Corinthians 15, encourages his readers, which now includes us, to, "**be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.**"

Jesus is Lord! O'er sin the mighty conqueror,
from death He rose and all His foes shall own His name.
Jesus is Lord! God sends His Holy Spirit
to show by works of power that Jesus is Lord.

Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord!

Praise him with 'Hallelujahs', for Jesus is Lord!