

Easter II, 11th April 2021

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (first in series exploring 1 Cor.15)

Hallelujah, Christ is risen! We said. He is risen indeed, Hallelujah.

Really?

But quite how good is the evidence for this remarkable claim? Couldn't there be some other explanation behind the Christian story?

We know, after all, that early on the tale spread that it might have been grave-robbers that emptied the tomb, stole the body. Such things weren't unheard of. And maybe, combined with that, it was wishful thinking that made the disciples think that Jesus was somehow still with them, so really and powerfully present spiritually that it was almost as if he was back physically? Maybe the whole story is a kind of symbol or metaphor for death not being the end, and for the triumph of Jesus' teaching and values. Maybe resurrection is about something that happens inside people now, as their lives get changed – and maybe it's actually got very little to do with happened, or not, to the actual, physical corpse of Jesus? Why, after all, should what happened to his body *matter* to you and me now? What difference could it really make?

Perhaps these questions have never occurred to you, in which case, feel free to switch off for most of the next six weeks' preaching! But they have occurred to *lots* of people, including good Christians right through the ages. From pretty much the beginning of Christianity, believers have been worrying about questions just like these. We do sometimes have this amusing idea that people in olden times found it much easier than we do to believe in things like bodily resurrections. They really didn't. They knew it was bizarre. They knew it was out-of-this-world. They found it deeply awkward and embarrassing and often tried to believe other things instead.

Nevertheless, also right from the beginning, there bodily resurrection was, presented as an essential part of Christian belief. As St. Paul says in our NT reading today, I handed onto you *as of first importance* what I in turn received: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that on the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures, and appeared to ... and then that list of witnesses. *As of first importance* This is the very heart of the Gospel, the basic creed given to the first churches, the absolute Christianity 101. He died for our sins, and on the third day he rose again, in accordance with the Scriptures.

So begins one of the greatest chapters Paul ever wrote, 1 Corinthians 15. In this chapter, he is trying to set out exactly what the resurrection of Jesus means, and why it is at the heart of the faith. Now, this is really, really early teaching. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians around AD 55. He'd set up the church in Corinth a few years previously, maybe AD 51/52. And note, what he says he did then is simply pass on what he had been told: I handed onto you what I in turn had received: Christ died for our sins, was buried and on the third day rose again. In other words, by round about AD51, this is the official, authorised version of the Christian message. Within twenty years, that is, of the crucifixion. You simply can't find an earlier Christianity, and cross and resurrection are the very heart of it.

And, already, there is confusion and debate. Read just a little bit further in 1 Cor 15, and you'll see Paul asking the church: 'how can some of you say there is no resurrection from the dead?' He's clearly arguing with Christians who just don't accept this belief – and, who it seems again later in the chapter, are not above a bit of mockery of it. Especially, and this is going to be a recurring theme throughout these weeks, when it comes to understanding the connection between Jesus' resurrection, and *our* resurrection. For Paul, the two things go together: what has already happened to Jesus is what we hope for. For the Christians he's addressing, it is all just too mind-bendingly mad to be true. So, if it all seems a bit mad to you too – you're in good company, and get ready over the next few weeks to hear what Paul says in response.

Today's reading, the first eleven verses of Chapter 15, is Paul introducing his argument, and at this early stage there are two crucial things to note.

Number one, listen to what follows when Paul says, I passed on to you as of first importance what I had first received. It is *not* a set of instructions about how to live. It is not values, like love each other, and serve each other and help each other. No. It is an *announcement*. Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and on the third day rose again. The Gospel is not *advice*. It is proclamation. Something has *happened*, out there, in the real world. God has *acted* in Jesus. *That* is what will save you. That is what you need to know. Not how you behave, not what you think, not your spiritual practices. Those things may follow, should follow, but the absolute heart and centre of the Gospel is *outside of you*. And that is why, I hope you have noticed, most of the sermons you hear from this pulpit are not about what you should do, or think, or feel – or when they are, it is always and only grounded in what *God* has done. The Gospel is about God's action, God's deeds, in Jesus. Not yours, not mine. We do not save ourselves, let alone the world. It is done, as Paul puts it in that simple phrase, *for us*.

Number two, specifically on the resurrection side of things. Whatever it was happened *on the third day*. It had a *date*. We are not talking about some slow, gradual, prayerful, meditative dawning of awareness that maybe after all the Cross wasn't the end of everything. Instead, something *happened*, something you could put on a calendar and say it happened *then*. Moreover, that something that was *witnessed* by many people, some of whom Paul says are still alive – the implication being, if you want to know more, go and ask them. They'll tell you what they saw. The Resurrection, says Paul, was *public* – as public and indisputably real as the Crucifixion.

At which point, I've gone ever so slightly too far. Because the historical evidence for the Crucifixion is overwhelming. Nearly all serious historians, no matter what their religious belief, think the Crucifixion happened. Not so the Resurrection. If they believed in the Resurrection, they'd be Christians, and most aren't. Whatever happened on the third day is obviously open to interpretation in a way that the Cross is not. The Cross was a public execution, plain and simple. The third day was ... what? Well, the discovery of an empty tomb, and people *thinking* that they saw the risen Jesus ... but did they? Maybe it was their minds playing tricks. Maybe they saw what they wanted to. Maybe they lied. There is room, says the secular historian, for lots of debate.

Whatever you make of those theories, note one major thing which is however not so open. That tomb was, beyond all reasonable doubt, empty.

Because think just for one moment. When first century Jews used the word 'resurrection', they always, invariably, meant something that involved the body. They did not think as we so often do, of a non-physical spirit or soul which survives death. They were familiar with that idea, and knew that it wasn't what they needed to say about Jesus, what that event on the third day demanded. They chose *resurrection* language, and such language always meant the physical body: these two arms, these two legs, magnificently transformed perhaps, but not left behind. Not left to rot. So when Mary and Peter and the rest of them started saying that Jesus was risen, that resurrection had happened, there was, if you were Pilate or Caiaphas, a very simple way to shut them up. All you had to was walk down to the tomb and drag the body out. 'There you go – no resurrection.' And that they could not do. Because the tomb was empty, and the body was gone. That's the bit of Resurrection belief which is as public, and as indisputable, as the Crucifixion. There is indeed more to Resurrection faith than believing in the empty tomb – but there isn't *less*.

It follows, incidentally, that at least in theory, the Gospel is dis-provable. Don't get me wrong; I don't think this is ever, ever going to happen. But *if*, in some mad world, a team of archaeologists discovered a tomb near Jerusalem with a crucified man, and a note signed by the twelve and the Blessed Virgin Mary saying, 'Here lies Jesus of Nazareth. Really sorry: we made it all up' – in that *very mad and not going to happen* world, Christianity would indeed be disproved. We would have to pack up and go home. Ours is a faith of events, of things that actually happened, in the real world that can to some extent be investigated by historians. We have that vulnerability, if you like, to history. That's the kind of truth the Gospel is.

And if that sounds like bad news, realise that is in fact good, wonderful. Because, fundamentally, it reminds us that what saves us, what our final joy and beauty and happiness depends on, is not something *in here*. You will not arrive at your final, glorious, God-intended destiny because you are wise, or spiritually mature, or morally good. Nor even because you have humble faith. You will arrive there *because of what God has done*. Outside of your head, outside of your heart, in the real world. You are caught up – the whole world is caught up – in something so much bigger than your own private interior spiritual experience. You are caught up in what happened on a Friday and a Sunday, on a hill and in a tomb, before witnesses, something done first and foremost for you, and outside of you. You do not have to save the world, you do not have to save yourself – for which thanks be to God, because you can't. But Hallelujah: He is risen indeed, and it is accomplished. To the one who did it all, be praise and glory, now and forever. Amen.