

18th April 2021

1 Cor.15:12-19

So, week two of our trip through Paul's great chapter on the resurrection, and this week looking at vv.12 through to 19.

Last week, you might remember, in the first eleven verses, Paul was setting out exactly what he'd first told the Corinthians when he preached the Gospel there a mere twenty years or so after the crucifixion. Just remember how early that is. This is Christianity at its very youngest, and what was at its core? *I proclaimed to you what I had first received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and on the third day rose again, according to the Scriptures.* Cross and resurrection. Not spiritual advice, not moral exhortation, but an announcement. From the beginning the Gospel was about an event, a double-sided event of cross and resurrection.

And what Paul emphasised in those first eleven verses is that the resurrection, just like the cross, was to some extent at least an event in real history. It had a date, *on the third day*. People *saw it*, on one occasion hundreds of them at the same time. It wasn't a picturesque way of symbolising something else, that really happened *inside* the disciples, in their hearts or their heads. No, it was something in the real, public, external world.

And the most obviously public bit of it was the discovery of an empty tomb. You can be almost stone-cold certain that that really happened. People really did stand there on the first Easter morning, slack-jawed, bewildered, frightened, looking at an empty tomb and not knowing what it meant. We *know* the body was gone. Because if it wasn't, if Pilate and Caiaphas had been able to produce it, the Gospel would have stopped there and then. But the body was gone, and the tomb was empty. Believing in the resurrection means more than that, yes indeed. We'll soon see just how much more. But it emphatically does not mean *less*. That was the first eleven verses, and last week's sermon.

And so, this week.

If all this is so, says Paul, if you're with me so far, then how can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead?

How can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead? What's happening here is that Paul is dealing with Christians who find the idea of resurrection just impossible to accept. We're not quite sure precisely what their objection was. Perhaps they simply thought that when you die, you die: full stop, extinction. More likely they believed in immortality, but thought this was only for the soul or the spiritual bit of a human being. Resurrection, they knew, meant the body too. It was a physical idea, or at least it *involved* the physical, and they said no, no: when you die, your body rots. It's only the shell. The *real* you is the inner you, the spiritual you, which soars away into heaven. Some of them might have imagined that it then became re-incarnate in a different body, or by contrast, that all individual spirits merged into some great cosmic unity. Some of these ideas of course sound familiar: most of what people imagine happens after death these days they imagined in those days too. It was a real mix and medley, but with one common denominator: whatever else happens, your body stays in the ground. There is no resurrection from the dead.

And so, they thought, let's be Christians without it. Let's, as it were, place that bit in brackets. And why not? Because there are indeed all sorts of Christian beliefs that can be put in brackets. You're a Christian, but don't believe every word in the Bible is true? That's fine, of course they're not. You're a Christian, but don't think people have to go to Heaven? Still fine. As it happens, I agree. You don't believe anything special happens to the bread and wine at the eucharist, they're just plain old bread and wine – well, maybe not 'fine', and I wish you thought otherwise, but it's not the end of the world. You don't believe in the Virgin Birth? Well, that saddens me, but on the other hand neither Paul, John nor Mark seem to think it especially important. All these things – even really quite important things – can, it seems, be put in brackets. You can disbelieve them, and still be Christian.

But not, it seems, the Resurrection. Deny this, Paul says, and the bottom falls out of everything. This, you cannot put in brackets.

Why?

Well, at one level, it's a matter of logic. Paul has just said that *the* essential core of the Gospel is Jesus' death and resurrection. Well, if you deny the essential core of anything, you no longer have it. Christianity *is* the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Take either of those things away, and you simply don't have it anymore. It's like trying to play football without goals, or even without a ball. It's like building a boat without a bottom. It simply, logically, can't be done. That's not true for the Virgin Birth. It's not true for what we do, or don't, believe about the Sacraments. Those things might be important – they *are* important - but they're not *that* important.

Which begs a second question: well, *why* is resurrection so important? It's such a strange belief after all - that the *body* should have a future? That, in some marvellous and mysterious sense, my two arms and my two legs are going to be taken up in glory, not left to rot? That really is quite mind-bending, quite difficult to accept. Paul is not unaware of this, by the way, and he will offer some helpful ways of thinking about it soon – wait for the sermon in about three more weeks – but for the moment, let's just pause on *why* it's important. Why does resurrection *matter*?

If you'll forgive me being a bit playful, it matters because matter matters. It matters because matter matters.

By which I mean that one of the few things the Bible insists on, pretty much from beginning to end, is that God made everything. And that he made everything *good*. The Bible refuses to carve reality up: to say, here is the spiritual, mental bit (the really good bit, the really important bit, the bit that gets to live forever), and here is the mucky, physical, weak and dying bit. The Bible does not do *bits*. It thinks of reality as *one*. The one reality has different dimensions of course: body and spirit aren't the same thing. But equally you can never split them up, never have one without the other. If that sounds a bit too confusing, then imagine trying to have your mind without also having your brain. Or having beautiful music, without also having air and wood and ivory and catgut. Physical and spiritual go together. You can't have one without the other. Matter *matters*.

And what really does want to carve things up, to pull them apart and destroy them is Death. Death is all about disintegration. It's about the ending of relationships between people, breaking us down into loneliness. It's about our bodies beginning to fall apart, long before we actually die. The moment of death itself is a great separation: the vital energy of life leaves the body, and we leave each other. And then of course, before too long, the physical frame itself literally disintegrates: ashes to ashes, dust to dust. This is what death does: it divides and breaks down. It tears apart. It's a vandal in God's good creation.

Which means incidentally, it is never a good thing. Please don't mistake me. Of course, sometimes, death comes as a blessed relief. Of course, there is often wisdom in not fighting it, in accepting it, and going gently into it. In the long run, we will all lose that fight, and we all know people whom, frankly, need their struggle to be over. But.... let's not fool ourselves here. We only welcome death because the process of dying beats us up so badly. Because the vandal does much terrible damage. The moment of death ends all that and so can sometimes be welcome – but it also ends *us*. It ends wrecks part of God's good creation. One day, left to itself, it would wreck *all* God's creation. And so even when, battered and exhausted, we welcome it - we still know it is not truly our friend. It is what Paul's going to call it later in this chapter, the last enemy.

Left to itself, death would end all God's creation. It would tear the world apart. But hear the Gospel: it is not left to itself. It is not left to itself. On the Cross, Jesus Christ went into death, into the very centre of its storm, into the great tearing apart. He let tear him apart – physically, through the nails. Spiritually: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. On the Cross all the forces of division and destruction run riot. He lets all that terrible destruction go to work in Him, and wreck Him. He lets death break him, and drag his wrecked body into its lair.

And then.... On the third day, he rose again, according to the Scriptures. I could show you a photo of an empty tomb, but for what it means all I have is words. It means all the power of death undone. It means a crucified, tortured, broken body made new, made vibrant and glorious. It means everything shattered knit back together again, it means love surging, it means the final declaration of truth – that the deepest down heart of things, the very foundation of reality, is not division and decay and disintegration. It's not violence. It's peace. It's unity. It's communion. It is love, and healing, and joy, and it will rise in all things. That's what resurrection means. That's why you can't bracket it. It's the very heart and centre. It *is* the Gospel.

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