

May 2nd, 2021 – 8am and 11.15

1 Corinthians 15:29-34

‘Otherwise’ begins our New Testament reading. ‘Otherwise, what those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead?’

Otherwise. It assumes you’ve been following the argument up to this point, and that you’ve remembered it from one week to the next, which also can’t, shall we say, be taken entirely for granted.

So, to briefly recap on our journey through 1 Corinthians 15, Paul’s great resurrection chapter, here’s the story so far:

First, in verses 1-11, Paul argued very strongly that the resurrection of Jesus was a real event. Those stories about an empty tomb, and the risen Jesus appearing to his friends, weren’t just symbolic picture ways of talking about something else – Jesus’ lasting influence, or some kind of private religious experience inside the believers’ hearts. No, Paul says, Jesus’ resurrection was a real event in the real world. It had a date. It had witnesses. You could investigate it. You’re not saved by something inside your head and heart; you’re saved by what God really did in history. That was verses 1-11.

Then, 12-19: Why should *resurrection* matter so much? Why is it rising from the dead that saves the world? Rather than, say, setting a great moral example, or teaching a new spiritual path, or even not really dying at all (as the Qu’ran says about Jesus)? Answer, says Paul, because death is the great vandal. Death is what breaks us up: socially, morally, spiritually, and ultimately physically. Death must be overcome, and that means all its damage must be undone. Not dodged or ignored: gone into, wrestled with, and beaten. Everything it has dragged into its lair must somehow be rescued and restored – everything, even the physical. Even matter *matters*: there’s a glorious destiny for our bodies too. That is the great promise of the empty tomb and the first Easter morning.

And then, in verses 20-28, last week's reading, Paul's focus moves from what happened to Jesus, to what's going to happen in us. He is the first fruits, the beginning, the place where the floodgates opened, and new life began to surge into the world. He is the new start for the human race - a start, Paul says, more powerful and creative even than Adam. From here on in, evil and death lose their grip, and grace and beauty and joy will surge through all of us. Will Surge through all things, in fact, until as in Paul's great closing words, 'God may be all in all.' God may be all in all.

So that's where we are. On the first Easter Day, the re-creation of the world began. The new creation that, this time, will not go wrong. The new creation which has already faced all the darkness and misery and death of the old one, corrupted and broken by evil; has faced them on the Cross and conquered them in the tomb. The new creation which will be what God always wanted: the perfect expression of his own life, shimmering and shining with all his beauty and joy, the whole world charged with the glory of God. 'God will be all in all.'

And this is our Gospel. A human being is not just a random collection of atoms, not just outcome of a blind process of chemical reactions, here today and gone tomorrow. That's not what you are, what any of us are. No, No, you were created out of love and destined for glory. You exist for a divine purpose, to shine with the beauty and joy of God in a way that only you can. There's a richness and brilliance ahead of you for which all this life, all this world, has merely been a taster. Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, says St. Paul, what God has stored up for those whom he loves: stored up, the Gospel says, for each one of us.

Otherwise And here we come to this morning's reading. Otherwise What are we doing? What are you Corinthian Christians doing when you receive baptism on behalf of the dead? That's a rather mysterious reference and we're not quite sure what Paul's getting at. The most likely guess, though, is that people were worried that their dead loved ones might somehow be left out of the coming glory, and thought that the way to make sure they weren't was to be baptised on their behalf, to baptise the dead as if it were by proxy. Whatever we make of that, and apart from the Mormons no-one does it now, it only makes sense if death is not the end. If death is but a beginning. That's Paul's point.

And less mysteriously, otherwise, what am I doing, says Paul? I put myself in danger every hour. I live my life in a way that makes no sense whatsoever, unless this story is true – unless my life is just the dress-rehearsal for when God will be all in all, for when love and joy and grace are everything. If that's *not* going to be the case, if we're just going to die and vanish, well then, I'd make some very different choices. Why get ready for grace and beauty and joy if they're not coming? In this world, living like grace and beauty and joy can be quite hard work. Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. And some will go further. Some will say, really quite reasonably, if this life is all that there is, if there is no glorious *destiny*, then we may make of life what we please, and what we please is power and pleasure, and we don't especially mind what that means for anyone else. We see that kind of thinking all around us, every single day, and we see its consequences in lives trampled all over. What you think about eternal life, shapes your daily life. Come to a sober and right mind, says Paul, and sin no more.

Now listen carefully. Paul's not saying here: behave well because if you don't, a big angry God is going to punish you after death. There are indeed worse things to think. The world would be much better if loan sharks and domestic abusers and corrupt judges, and me, truly feared the judgement of God. But it remains a fairly immature kind of religion, and it's not really what Paul's driving at. He's not saying, 'be scared, and behave, or God will get you!'. No, he's saying: remember who you are. You are a human being. You are the image of God, made to express perfectly what He is: love, joy, beauty, glory. And what's more, because of Jesus, some day this purpose will be fulfilled. It will actually happen. You *will* be all these things. So why are you messing around? Why are you giving fear and greed and anger or whatever it is house room in your soul? Why are you letting them shape who you are, what you do? These things have no future. They're doomed. They belong to the old world, the old you. They get in the way. Off with them! Get your life ready for the glory of God to rush in, because it's already starting to flow.

One last word. Bad company ruins good morals, says Paul. Bad company ruins good morals. It sounds a bit priggish, but there's a serious point. The people you will surround yourself with, the people you pay most attention to, have a great influence on you. They shape how you see things, what you believe, and what you do. By and large, what they value, you will value; what they look down on, you will look down on. By and large, unless you're a very strong personality, your crowd shapes your vision, for better, for worse. And what shapes your vision, shapes you.

And this is part of why we have a church. We're here to shape each other, to remind each other of the Gospel, to keep each other's eyes fixed upon the glory. Left to ourselves, it is so easy so slip back into the standards of the world around us – to not be so generous. To not forgive. To not treat the poor and the weak and the vulnerable as if they are God Himself. The world, generally speaking, will not urge you to do these things, and not help you either. Surround yourself, says Paul, with people who will – with the church. We're not, of course, perfect. The Corinthian Church Paul wrote too was *far* from perfect, and so are we. We get things wrong all the time. And that is – if not fine – just how it is, for now. *BUT*, and this is the crucial thing, we have also seen the vision. Our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. Because of Jesus Christ, we know who God is, what He's done, and what he wants for us. We *know* what we're called to. We've seen, in Jesus, a bit of what it means, and what it looks like, and we're helping each other move towards it. And so we go on together, into glory. Amen.