

Scripture Reading For February 17 2019

1 Cor 15:12-23 (NIV)

¹² But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³ But each in turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

Sermon: If Christ Has Not Been Raised ...

Our family went to see *Windsor Light's* production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat* a few years ago. While it is, of course, a little dated and the over-the-top Elvis persona as Pharaoh a little "creepy," nevertheless it was a delightful evening. Today's topic of the resurrection brought to mind one of the songs from that hit show. Its lyrics had the lines: "There's one more angel in heaven; there's one more star in the sky¹ . . ." And this got me to thinking about the problem many have with the apparent *finality* of death and, hence, seek hope of some continuity beyond the grave.

The Greek influence on life-after-death was prominent among some of the sophisticated non-Jews of Corinth in Paul's day. It is a view that *we* have inherited, namely the "immortality of the soul," that after a person dies, the soul – the "real you" - lives on in some kind of *disembodied* form. Many Christians today articulate that expectation, that the soul or spirit of a person has gone to "heaven" and is now with God, along with others who have died and, perhaps, are now smiling "down" on us. While this is comforting, the difficulty is simply there is *no* biblical evidence to support this view! Worse still, Paul would see this as heresy, as we heard in our reading this morning.

Part of the belief structure of the Greek "immortality of the soul" is that the body is a dark, corrupting prison and in death the rational soul is finally released and set free. The physical body is, therefore, seen in a somewhat negative light.² Paul, being a Jew, saw things differently. He would begin by going

¹ See Dan 12:2-3 for a *metaphor* pertaining to stars!

² Consequently, what one did with the body was immaterial! Paul would disagree – see 1 Cor 6:19-20.

back to Genesis 2:7, where it says: “Then the LORD God formed Adam³ from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” Bodies matter, creation matters, physicality matters because through the divine Spirit we became *living beings*. In fact, we can *only* conceive of ourselves as embodied; we are a *unity* of body, mind, and spirit⁴ in Hebrew thinking; we *can’t separate* the soul from the body.⁵

However, Paul has heard that some in Corinth believe there is no resurrection *of the dead*.⁶ First, we must understand that “resurrection” is not some generic word that means “life after death,” and nor does it mean the resuscitation of someone who has just died. “Resurrection of the dead” means an *embodied* existence in some new form⁷ that will occur when Christ returns and the longed-for Day of the Lord arrives. This Jewish, apocalyptic view was deemed too childish and literalistic for the philosophically-informed elite of Corinth. After all, for them, the body was expendable and ultimate reality is *purely* spiritual. Even so, it seems most likely they *did* believe that a noble and honorable person, like Jesus, could be resurrected⁸ – but they found it most unpalatable to believe in a widespread bodily resurrection of the dead. Paul totally disagrees and he begins by *refuting* their position and then *confirms* his own.⁹ As we will see, Paul *cannot separate* the resurrection of Jesus *from* the resurrection of the dead.¹⁰ He states, “*If* there is no resurrection of the dead, *then* Christ has *not* been raised.”¹¹ And he goes on in his refutation to explain the disastrous consequences: *If* Christ has *not* been raised then (a) our preaching was hollow or empty and we are deluded liars, (b) your faith is futile and you are still in your sins, (c) and those who have died¹² are utterly lost.¹³ And his chilling conclusion is that, “Of all people, we are most to be pitied”¹⁴ because we have deluded ourselves and believe in a lie.

Paul insists that to deny the possibility of the resurrection knocks the bottom out of the Christian faith. Quite literally, it destroys the foundation on which our faith is based. Now, of course, Paul believes Christ *has* been raised, and so in the next few verses¹⁵ he explains what Christ’s resurrection means.

³ Paul’s mention of Adam in 1 Cor 15:21,45 means that he presumes they know Gen 2-3; perhaps he taught them that.

⁴ Consequently, physical pain is real, not an illusion.

⁵ The Bible does *not* support such a (Greek) dualistic view; it is *wholistic*. (That is why Jesus’ healings was a sign of salvation!)

⁶ 1 Cor 15:12.

⁷ The resurrection body of Jesus was different from what it was before; it was not merely a resuscitated body but a gracious *new creation of God*.

⁸ This is one explanation as to why they would accept the “creed” of 1 Cor 15: 3b-5, which Paul saw as common ground.

⁹ Refutation followed by confirmation is a rhetorical tool that Paul adopts, and they would appreciate the power (and skill) of his argument.

¹⁰ See also 1 Thess 4:13 – 18. Note, however, the context for that discussion is different from here. In 1 Cor 15 he is not trying to reassure believers who have anxiety over the ultimate fate of their loved ones. Instead, he is trying to introduce some anxiety amongst the Corinthians about this point! He wants them to consider the full consequences of denying the resurrection of the dead.

¹¹ 1 Cor 15:13,16. Paul insists that Christ’s resurrection is a real event, a *bodily* resurrection, not just an illustrative fable!

¹² Paul uses the language of “sleep,” rather than the permanence of death, to indicate that there is a promised future awakening at the dawn of the Day of the Lord.

¹³ 1 Cor 15:14-18.

¹⁴ 1 Cor 15:19b.

¹⁵ 1 Cor 15:20-28.

Paul describes Christ's resurrection in terms of "first fruits"¹⁶ of much bigger harvest. That is why Paul sees Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of the dead as inseparable. The Jewish understanding of "first fruits" has the language of promise, guarantee, and confidence; because the first fruits have arrived the ultimate harvest is *assured* – it's just a matter of timing. Christ's resurrection is, therefore, a pledge of the future resurrection of the dead "in Christ"¹⁷; he is the representative example¹⁸ of the rest of the crop. Paul, and others, came to this conclusion precisely because there was *no* Jewish expectation that the Messiah would be killed and rise again. They therefore understood the resurrection of Messiah Jesus as an event of cosmic significance – a paradigm shift. God's raising of Jesus from the dead is not merely a wondrous event that confirmed his special status before God; it is the beginning of much greater future harvest - the first fruit of the new creation¹⁹ that *God* will also bring about at the right time.

This argument is still very important for today because it is too easy to reduce Christianity to a spirituality devoid of historical events. That kind of thing can happen when we proclaim Jesus as a good moral teacher and want to distance him from his crucifixion and resurrection. In which case, Christianity becomes a moral code to guide well-meaning people on how to live their lives better. On the other hand, there are many Christians who warmly dream of going to heaven but ignore the resurrection of the body, which is a sure sign that *death itself* has been defeated.²⁰ Consequently, if we are not careful, our preaching can become empty, a mere human social construct having no substance or effectiveness. That is why Paul says, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins."²¹ In other words, without the resurrection there would be no release from the *power* of sin. In the English language, "faith" is a noun and we shift to the word "believe" to create a verb; in Greek, the verb and noun have the same root. Paul is therefore saying that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then what is at stake is not just some wrong *belief* but that the action of faith itself has lost its *effectiveness*, its *power* to save. Redemption *from* sin is *not* redemption without the redemption *to* life. We cannot separate the cross from the resurrection; because he lives, we also shall live.

The belief in the resurrection of the body is also an affirmation of the *significance* of human life as part of the *created* world. God's intention is not only for the resurrection of humankind, but also for the renewal of creation itself.²² What those Corinthians were denying, whether they meant to or not, was that God considers his creation to be "very good"²³ and, consequently, our flawed bodies are loved by

¹⁶ See also Exod 23:19a. In Jewish thinking, the resurrection of the dead is not something that happens to *one* person only. Consequently, the early Christians, Paul among them, took the resurrection of Jesus as a sign of the end of the age was breaking in. If Christ had been raised, then the resurrection of the others *must* follow in due course. In fact, such is Paul's confidence, in 1 Cor 15:21 he speaks of the resurrection of the dead as having "also come" (see tenses in NRSV cf. NIV).

¹⁷ 1 Cor 15:23. See also Rom 8:29.

¹⁸ That is what the Adam-Christ analogy is all about; see 1 Cor 15: 21-22, 45-48; Rom 5:12-21.

¹⁹ See also 2 Cor 5:17.

²⁰ 1 Cor 15:26.

²¹ 1 Cor 15:17. Moreover, the resurrection of Jesus confirms the truth of his words that sin is forgiven.

²² The resurrection of the dead, therefore, holds creation and redemption together.

²³ Gen 1:31.

God and worthy of being redeemed.²⁴ If there was no resurrection of the dead, God would have abandoned the bodies that he has given us, along with the physicality of *all* of creation. If that were the case, I would go further and say that our physical sufferings don't really matter in the long run. However, that is *not* the case; creation *will* be rescued! If, like me, you love the beauty and good things of creation, our environment and context for life, then this is "good news." We are *not* souls imprisoned in our bodies, our identity is bound up in our *bodily* experience. If we are to be saved, we must be saved as embodied persons in a real tangible way, rather than some ethereal happening.²⁵ The precise form of that resurrected body is something we can't imagine, which is why faith is required.²⁶ Science may be the best set of tools for describing natural events, but the resurrection of the body is, by definition, *not* a natural event. It's a new creation by the grace and power of God.

Earlier in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he mentions how the notion of a Messiah who was killed *by crucifixion* was a stumbling block to the Jews and sheer foolishness to the non-Jews.²⁷ Well, the belief in the resurrection of the dead may be no better, especially for non-Jews! One key thing about life-after-death, whatever that may mean, is that we humans can neither produce nor control nor manipulate what happens after we die; our hope is exclusively in God's hands – or in God's grace. That again is where faith comes in and why, as Christians, we base our hope on a particular event in human history – the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. The cross and the resurrection is not just about the forgiveness of sin, it is also about God's bigger plan to rescue and put right all that is wrong in the whole of the created order. Yes, it is true that, for us, the resurrection of the body remains inescapably a future event, but we need to hold on to that bigger picture of what "first fruits" means. If we are not careful, by denying the resurrection we find ourselves turning inwards and focusing on our own religious *experiences* as being of prime importance, which was what some in the Corinthian church were doing. We must have our worldview converted because the hope of the Church is not confined to *this* world but focused on the faithfulness of a *Creator* God. And confidence in that future resurrection gives us the courage and freedom to live in the shadow of the cross as we identify with the sufferings of this present age. And finally, it is the resurrection that makes sense of life and teachings of Jesus. It makes sense of his healing miracles because they demonstrate that physical bodies matter; those miracles are a foretaste of the wholeness that is to come. And it makes sense of his paradoxical statement: "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."²⁸ Amen. Let us pray.

²⁴ Consequently, what we do with our bodies is also of importance in God's eyes – see: 1 Cor 6:19-20.

²⁵ See also Rom 8:23: We await "the redemption *of* our bodies," not *from* our bodies!

²⁶ Belief in Christ's resurrection provides reason to have faith in our own bodily resurrection. And faith in our own resurrection provides reason to believe Christ's.

²⁷ 1 Cor 1:22-23.

²⁸ See: Mark 8:35-36; Matt 16:25-26; Luke 9:24-25; 17:33; John 12:25