

Scripture Reading for February 24th 2019

1 Cor 15:35-38;42-50 (NIV)

³⁵ But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" ³⁶ How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷ When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. ³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.

⁴² So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴ it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵ So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶ The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. ⁴⁷ The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. ⁴⁸ As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹ And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.

⁵⁰ I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Sermon: Transformed Bodies!

Today's sermon is the last in a trilogy from 1 Corinthians 15, and its worth beginning by spending a few moments reminding ourselves of some of the key points Paul has been making concerning the resurrection of the dead. He began by establishing common ground with the Christians in Corinth using words of an ancient creed, namely, "That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve (disciples)."¹ Despite that common ground, Paul has heard that some in Corinth believe there is no resurrection *of the dead*.² Paul *refutes* that position by refusing to *separate* the resurrection of Jesus *from* the resurrection of the dead on the Great Day of the Lord. He states, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, *then* Christ has *not* been raised."³ And he goes on to explain the disastrous consequences: *If* Christ has *not* been raised *then*: our preaching was empty and we are liars, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins, and those who have died are utterly lost.⁴ Paul then describes Christ's resurrection in terms of "first fruits" of much bigger harvest at the end of time, when Christ returns.⁵ We heard all about that last week – and that sermon is on our website if you missed it.⁶

Some in Corinth, like many today, believed in the Greek idea of the "immortality of the soul," that a person's "soul" lives on in a *disembodied* form after they die and, consequently, ultimate reality is *purely* spiritual. Note that their incredulity concerning the resurrection of the dead was *not* based on scientific doubts about the possibility of miracles, or even the legitimacy of "speaking in tongues" - they had no problems about such things! Rather, they had an understandable aversion to the crude idea that a dead body could somehow be re-animated after death. Paul cleverly responds to their skepticism by addressing questions from a hypothetical doubter who asks, "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body will they come?"⁷ Paul begins by bluntly calling such a person a "Fool,"⁸ saying "You're talking nonsense!"⁹ As you might imagine, calling members of your congregation "fools" is something were told *never* to do at seminary! Yet Paul resorts to such strong language here. Why is that? Because, for Paul, the resurrection of the dead into some new *embodied* form is foundational to the Christian faith; without it, the gospel he preached was simply "fake news" and powerless.

Paul ignores the first question, since the real issue here is *not* "How is this possible?" or "By what agency are the dead raised?" because it is abundantly clear that the resurrection of the dead can *only* be achieved by *God's* power.¹⁰ Paul focusses on the second question, "What will be the *form* of that body?" Paul responds by implying that it is they, not he, who are resorting to crude literalisms! "Any fool should

¹ 1 Cor 15:3b-5.

² 1 Cor 15:12.

³ 1 Cor 15:13,16. Paul insists Christ's resurrection was a real event, a *bodily* resurrection, one *witnessed* by others (v5-8).

⁴ 1 Cor 15:14-18.

⁵ 1 Cor 15:20,23.

⁶ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/If-Christ-Has-Not-Been-Raised.pdf>

⁷ 1 Cor 15:35. This rhetorical technique potentially cushions any individual in Corinth who has such issues!

⁸ 1 Cor 15:36a (NRSV). The "how foolish" (see NIV) fails to recognise that it is the *person* who is foolish *not* the idea.

⁹ Anthony Thiselton's translation.

¹⁰ This is implied in 1 Cor 15:38 – "But *God* gives it a body *as he has determined*. . . ."

realise,” says Paul, “that the resurrection of the dead *shouldn’t* be naïvely understood as the ghoulish resuscitation of corpses. Rather, the concept of resurrection necessarily entails *transformation* into a new and glorious state of being!”

He then introduces an analogy of a seed as a model. You plant an ordinary seed in the ground and it is *transformed* into a different kind of existence.¹¹ Moreover, no one could predict the final shape and texture of the mature plant from the appearance of the seed.¹² It is the *Creator* God¹³ who chooses what sort of form to give each seed.¹⁴ Paul infers that our experience of seed-to-plant transformations illustrate that bodily forms *can* change radically, while maintaining continuity of *identity*. Consequently, Paul stresses both the *transformation* of the body into its new resurrected state *and* its *continuity* with the mortal body that preceded it.¹⁵

Paul then goes on to explain what *kind* of body we will have, and many if not most translations do very poor job of conveying the meaning the Greek words used; I think this translation is much better: “[Just as in the transformation of the seed], that’s what it’s like with the resurrection of the dead. It is sown decaying, and raised undecaying. It is sown in shame, and raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, and raised in power. It is sown as the embodiment of ordinary nature, and raised as the embodiment of the spirit. If ordinary nature has its embodiment, then the spirit too has its embodiment.”¹⁶

Notice that Paul is *not* contrasting what we call “a body,” that is a physical object, and what we might call “a ghost,” a spiritual object in the sense of it being nonphysical. The contrast is between a body animated by a type of life that wears out and a body animated by another type of life that *won’t* wear out!¹⁷ The word for “decay” here denotes a *process* rather than a *quality*, in other words, decreasing capabilities, increasing weakness, in short: aging. The contrast is not simply the cessation of decay but a *reversal* of that decay process, meaning increasing in strength and vitality - a recovery of youth! Paul speaks to the mindset of those in Corinth who saw the physical body in a negative light, as a dark, corrupting prison for the soul, a source of embarrassment - tainted as it is by frailty, sickness, and death.¹⁸ In contrast, says Paul, the new body will be splendid and glorious, and certainly nothing to be ashamed of; a body transformed from weakness to being powerful. Incidentally, the word “glory” here doesn’t mean shiny or bright; glory is in contrast to shame or humiliation, not in contrast to darkness.

Verse 44 has caused much confusion over the years because in most translations, including our pew Bibles [NIV], we read of a “natural” body and a “spiritual” body.¹⁹ Such terms imply *to us* material or physical bodies in contrast to immaterial or nonphysical bodies. Such an interpretation would *negate*

¹¹ “Resuscitating” the seed, so to speak, after its been underground would simply give you the seed once again!

¹² See also Mark 4:26-28. Using the power of *association* conveys *credibility*, rather than being a pure display of logic.

¹³ 1 Cor 15:39-41 makes connections with creation and with various *kinds* of “bodies” (celestial and animated).

¹⁴ 1 Cor 15:38.

¹⁵ This delicate balance between continuity and discontinuity characterises this discussion as a whole.

¹⁶ 1 Cor 15:42-44; N. T. Wright’s *New Kingdom Translation*. (See also the wording in the *Jerusalem Bible*).

¹⁷ See also Rom 8:10 – 11.

¹⁸ Paul emphatically rejects the soul/body dualism of Platonism which denigrated embodiment, while maintaining we are more than simply physical (material) bodies.

¹⁹ 1 Cor 15:44.

Paul's whole point in this chapter! As I said earlier, Paul is contrasting two types of bodies; our present embodiment of ordinary nature will be sown in the ground and raised as the embodiment of the spirit, a body with transformed properties. The body associated with the first human, Adam, is mortal and bound to the earth from which it came; on the other hand, the body associated with the risen Christ [the "last Adam"²⁰] will be immortal and stamped by the image of "the man from heaven" – Jesus himself.²¹ Consequently, our salvation entails participation "in Christ" and being transformed into his likeness, by the grace and power of God. Put another way, salvation does not involve redemption *from* the body but redemption *of* the body – as Paul says in Romans!²²

I said earlier that Paul refused to *separate* the resurrection of Jesus *from* the future resurrection of the dead, for both are gracious acts of *recreation* by God. Christ's resurrection is therefore the model, the prototype, the first fruit of the assured final harvest at the end of time.²³ Christ's resurrected body is both like and unlike his previous earthly body; recognisable to those who witnessed his resurrection,²⁴ but also transformed and different.²⁵ Similarly, the transformed bodies of believers will be identifiable but transformed from the image of Adam to the image of Christ.²⁶

In all this, Paul is seeking to make the resurrection of the dead seem appealing rather than appalling to the Corinthians.²⁷ Embodiment is a *good thing*! And God who created all things can redeem and transform the body as and when he sees fit.²⁸ Does this excite you? Does this provide a sense of hope for the future? Does this convince you that death "has indeed lost its sting,"²⁹ as Paul later says, quoting the prophet Hosea? Do you believe that resurrection means death itself has "been swallowed up in victory,"³⁰ as Isaiah says? Paul urges the faithful in Corinth to stand firm on this foundation, to hold tight to the traditional creed Paul mentioned earlier; do that and all will be well, says Paul.³¹

I believe in this stuff! Do you? Last week I mentioned some reasons why I think all this is important. I want to briefly add to that today. First, for many today, belief in the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus is hardly credible and so the idea of the resurrection of the dead into transformed bodies is only for the gullible. It is so much easier to believe in the Greek body/soul dualism and the immortality of a non-physical soul, even though any atheist will tell you there's no evidence to support that! I suspect one of the difficulties many have with the resurrection is that in a scientific age few really believe in the *possibility* of miracles, and so resurrection is simply dismissed. I think another reason is that many no longer

²⁰ 1 Cor 15:45.

²¹ 1 Cor 15:47-49; see also Rom 8:29, Phil 3:20–21.

²² See Rom 8:11,23.

²³ See also N. T. Wright, *Surprise by Hope*, 160.

²⁴ 1 Cor 15:5-8.

²⁵ The ascended Christ still has that same body!

²⁶ Adam represents a life lived according to the "flesh," (i.e., life in opposition to what God wants, one that places confidence in earthly things and in human achievements). In contrast, Christ's life models the "fruit of the Spirit" (See Gal 5:19–26).

²⁷ In so doing, he therefore claims continuity and discontinuity between 'what we already are now' and 'what we shall be in the new-but-not-yet-complete life in Christ.'

²⁸ 1 Cor 15:38a. Moreover, Paul does *not* see the body as inherently evil and therefore cannot be resurrected.

²⁹ 1 Cor 15:55 – citing Hosea 13:14 (LXX).

³⁰ 1 Cor 15:54b – citing Isa 25:8.

³¹ 1 Cor 15:58.

believe history is going somewhere and that secular malaise has infected some in the Church. We are happy to believe in a *Creator* God, but *not* in one who *re-creates* – which is what resurrection implies! And it is also easier to believe that Jesus was a great moral teacher, but let's not speak of him as *divine* or a pre-existing member of the Trinity. And so what we are effectively left with is Deism, which asserts God made the world but has no further interest in it and we are now on our own. Many people who say they believe in God today are really Deists.³² Judaism and Christianity have never seen cosmic and world history like that. God has begun something special in creation and *will* bring it to completion on the Great Day of the Lord, when all that is wrong in the world will be judged and put right. If we live our lives without being aware of God's end-goal,³³ which includes the resurrection of the dead for those "in Christ,"³⁴ then we have a we have only half a Gospel. We have a creation and Christ's teaching to love God and your neighbour (including your enemy) and that's about it. And I suggest that alone is not very inspiring for everyday life, let alone when in a crisis! Paul saw the resurrection of the dead as fundamental to the Christian faith; what does resurrection mean to you?

Second, we also need to appreciate that those in Corinth, who believed in that ultimate reality was purely spiritual, *also* saw the physical body as – essentially - expendable and so you could do whatever you want with it.³⁵ Paul disagreed and explained earlier in the letter that the freedom we have "in Christ" doesn't mean our physical bodies don't matter; Paul states: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honour God with your bodies."³⁶ Again bodies really matter for Paul; we must also broaden this to say creation itself matters – as I mentioned last week – and that creation itself will be redeemed and transformed, not just our bodies, as part of God's re-creation. There are many Christians today who don't believe this, proclaiming: "This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through." What logically follows from this perspective is that Global Warming and care for the environment are not a serious concern because "heaven" is thought to be a place of disembodied spirits in the presence of God and the physical world doesn't matter.³⁷

Creation matters, bodies matter. Look at the healing ministry of Jesus as a sign and the first fruits of the Kingdom of God. And let's be busy following his example, transforming the world in the power of the Spirit – who is also transforming us into Christ's likeness. And let's do that confident in the knowledge that God *will* complete what he has begun. I conclude by borrowing a verse from earlier in Paul's letter: "No eye has seen, or ear heard, or mind imagined, the things God has prepared for those who love him."³⁸ Amen.

³² Deists don't pray. Prayer is wishful thinking and for our benefit only, for God is not listening!

³³ Technically, "eschatology."

³⁴ 1 Cor 15:22-23.

³⁵ 1 Cor 6:12-20.

³⁶ 1 Cor 6:19-20.

³⁷ Some go even further claiming that it says in Genesis that God has given humans "*dominion* over creation" (Gen 1:28) so we can do anything we like to it. That is another terrible translation; God delegating responsibility over creation to humans does not mean abuse it! No, it means care for creation *as God would care for it*, like a shepherd cares for his sheep.

³⁸ 1 Cor 2:9 (This is taken out of its original context, but it is still true!)