

Today we're looking at a difficult subject – death – or rather resurrection, which is much more positive. Often, not understanding resurrection means that we also misunderstand death, and so come up with Euphemisms for it – anyone who remembers Monty Python's dead parrot sketch will know what I mean.

Mr. Praline: I wish to complain about this parrot what I purchased not half an hour ago from this very boutique.

Owner: Oh yes, the, uh, the Norwegian Blue...What's,uh...What's wrong with it?

Mr. Praline: I'll tell you what's wrong with it, my lad. 'E's dead, that's what's wrong with it!

Owner: No, no, 'e's uh,...he's resting.

Mr. Praline: Look, matey, I know a dead parrot when I see one, and I'm looking at one right now.

Owner: No no he's not dead, he's, he's restin'! Remarkable bird, the Norwegian Blue, idn'tit, ay? Beautiful plumage!

Mr. Praline: The plumage don't enter into it. It's stone dead.

Owner: Nononono, no, no! 'E's resting! (more dialogue)

Mr. Praline: 'E's not restin'! 'E's passed on! This parrot is no more! He has ceased to be! 'E's expired and gone to meet 'is maker! 'E's a stiff! Bereft of life, 'e rests in peace! If you hadn't nailed 'im to the perch 'e'd be pushing up the daisies! 'Is metabolic processes are now 'istory! 'E's off the twig! 'E's kicked the bucket, 'e's shuffled off 'is mortal coil, run down the curtain and joined the bleedin' choir invisible!! THIS IS AN EX-PARROT!!

See what I mean – but this attempt to play down death is nothing new. Paul had taught the Christians in Corinth about Jesus, his death and resurrection, and what it means for them – but they somehow had forgotten what Paul had taught them, and seek his help. This help comes in 3 chunks.

1 The resurrection of Jesus – (1-11)

At the heart of the gospel lies a scandalous claim: The ancient God of Israel raised Jesus -- a first century Jew -- from the dead.

This message must have been a tough sell among the nations who had their own ancient gods with spectacular temples and golden statues. Corinth was no exception. Temples to other gods surrounded the centre of the town and towered over the marketplace. Religion was at the heart of everyday life. And yet a church formed around the scandalous claim of the bodily resurrection of a Jewish peasant from a backwater region of the Empire.

Perhaps the Corinthians had an easier time believing the claim when Paul was with them. After all, Paul was convinced that he had seen the risen Christ. Indeed, it is hard to account for his radical life change otherwise.

Could God raise the dead? We state as such every week in our creed, but do we believe it, and if we do, does it make a difference to our lives as it did to Paul's? Couldn't we just follow Jesus's teaching without talking about resurrection?

No, says Paul - For Paul, there is no good news - the gospel is worthless - unless God has raised Jesus from the dead. If God has not raised Jesus, if God has not claimed victory over death, then the gospel is a sham.

So In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul addresses the Corinthians' concerns over resurrection. He spends more time on this topic than any other topic in the letter. Given the importance of this belief to the heart of the gospel it is not hard to see why it is critical for the apostle to remind the church of the gospel that they had believed.

The text begins with a reminder of the message that Paul has passed on to them -- a message that he did not invent but received from God.

How would you sum up the Christian gospel in less than 20 words?

That's what Paul does In 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. Christ has died for our sins. He was buried and raised on third day.

There are some noteworthy emphases in Paul's retelling. He notes that the life and death of Christ were related to scripture; in fact, he makes this claim twice. Second, he emphasizes post resurrection appearances -- a point that is less surprising since he is going to reiterate that the resurrection did occur.

Why might he emphasize Old Testament scripture? The church in Corinth, though it appears to have a few Jewish believers, like Crispus, for instance, is a church mainly composed of Gentiles - just like us. There is no guarantee that the non-Jews know scripture well or even consider it authoritative.

Paul would have instructed them in scripture while he was with them. The references here though remind the Corinthians that this God is not an upstart God. The God who raised Jesus has been active a long time. This is the work of an ancient God. And this God is faithful and trustworthy (1 Corinthians 1:9; 10:13).

The resurrection appearances also lend credibility to the story. Peter - called here by a name that reflects the name that Jesus himself gave to him - Cephas - Rock and the twelve would be considered authoritative. It seems that the church has at least heard of Cephas, given Paul's recounting of possible divisions in the beginning of the letter (1:12). If twelve apostles are not enough, Paul cites a resurrection appearance to more than five hundred people -- some of whom were still alive at the time of his writing. Then he cites James and all the apostles. Clearly, he is using the designation of "apostle" as inclusive of more than the twelve, since he himself is among them.

Paul does not deserve to be among them -- at least he does not think so. The language that he uses to describe himself gets lost in translation. Our English translations often say something to the effect of an untimely birth: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me" (verse 8). This makes it sound like he was just born at the wrong time -- as though he was born too late to be among the twelve. But this is a misinterpretation.

The word that Paul uses to describe himself is a premature birth -- a birth that usually results in death. It is the epitome of weakness. In a world where only fifty percent of full-term births reached the age of ten, the premature baby had little to no chance of survival. This is the same term used to describe a stillbirth. In other words *the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not the only resurrection story in this passage.*

Paul so firmly believes the resurrection because he was as good as dead when Christ appeared to him. He was killing the church of God. He was doing everything in his power to end the Jesus movement. He was a murderer and a persecutor and completely unworthy of God's grace. And God chose him anyway.

Whenever Paul recounts his pre-conversion life, he notes his time as a persecutor of the church (see Philippians 3:4-6; Galatians 1:13, 23; see also 1 Timothy 1:13). He remains overwhelmed by God's grace that God could forgive him for such atrocities. And he returns that gratitude in service to God. He notes how hard he labours for this gospel. He was the least likely candidate for God to choose. If God can do something good through Paul the murderer, surely that God has the power to work wonders in the lives of others. In the lives of you and me, if we would but reflect. The fact that the Corinthians have believed the scandal of the resurrection demonstrates that they too have been touched by God's grace.

(John Brown's body...)

2. the resurrection of the body (12-20)

Now, Paul turns to the nature of the resurrection – it might be just about acceptable to believe in a spiritual resurrection – but Paul clearly makes the case that Jesus was a bodily resurrection.

It does not matter to him how scandalous it sounds. The scandal is part of the good news. Nonetheless, some of the Corinthians must have winced at the idea of a God who raised corpses.

Why would God want these bodies? Why can we not just believe that God is powerful and follow Jesus's teaching to love one another? Do we really need to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead? Do we really need to live in hope of Christ's return?

Paul does not budge. If there is no resurrection, there is no hope. If there is no resurrection, then everything we thought we knew about God is a lie. If there is no resurrection, then all we have is this life. And the so-called gospel is not really "good news" at all.

The text does not specify how Paul discovered that the Corinthians were doubting the resurrection, but the apostle does not sugar-coat his response. The word that Paul uses to describe what is being resurrected is *nekros*, a corpse. He does not say that the person's spirit is resurrected, or that the soul will go on and be with Jesus. He does not talk about loved ones looking down from heaven or floating around. The focus is fairly and squarely on corpses.

The emphasis in this whole chapter of the letter is on a bodily resurrection. This is a God who cares about the physical stuff of the body. Though the text does not specify what the Corinthians' concerns are, their main objection to the resurrection appeared to centre around the body since that is the focus of Paul's argument.

There are many reasons why a first century audience might not find belief in a bodily resurrection appealing. Even in Greek culture, that celebrated the body in its art, there were still strands of philosophical thought that vilified the body and cautioned against giving into its desires. The body, after all, was corrupt, physical matter. According to Plutarch, death was simply the release of the soul from the body. Marcus Aurelius taught that at death the body goes to the earth and the soul to the atmosphere.¹The separation of the soul from the fleshly matter of the body was a widespread belief.

I spent last Thursday in Rochester Cathedral – it's a wonderful place, and every time I go I spot something new. Just to the right of the main altar, there's a door – it used to lead to the chapter house of the old abbey attached to the cathedral, in honour of the 14th century bishop who built it– and around the door there are stone figures, of Jesus, and saints of old, and at the top is a very small figure – it represents Hamo ascending to heaven – it's a strange image, but sums up what Paul states here – our soul is found in bodily form!

If the soul, which was considered pure and heavenly or celestial in substance, longed to escape the corrupt body, why would this God raise corpses? This must have seemed counterintuitive to Corinthians who had thought of themselves as educated, sophisticated, and wise. Why couldn't they place their hope in their souls going to be with the Lord?

Paul does not invent hope in the resurrection. Strands of Jewish thought hoped for resurrection. Paul was trained as a Pharisee and, according to the author of Acts, used the belief of resurrection to cause an uproar among the Jewish leaders who were considering his case (Acts 23:6-10). It was not hard to cause a disturbance over resurrection since the Sadducees, who were present at his trial, did not believe in the resurrection. Yet, like the Pharisees, many Jews maintained hope in resurrection.

Paul's experience of seeing the resurrected Christ (1 Corinthians 15:8-11) changed his perspective on when and how God was renewing God's creation. Paul's hope for resurrection was no longer a distant future dream. God's life-giving power had invaded the cosmos and conquered death by resurrecting Jesus. This is why resurrection is important - With this act, God declared certain victory over death, not just Jesus death, but my death and your death.

Paul does not care that the hope of a bodily resurrection might be repulsive. Christ's resurrection is non-negotiable. It has to be for Paul's gospel to work. At the heart of this good news is the resurrection of Jesus. If God did not actually raise Jesus from the dead, then God is not stronger than death.

Death, for Paul, is not a neutral force. Death is an enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). It is an anti-God power that must be destroyed if creation is to experience abundant life (1 Corinthians 15:24-28). Don't we feel that too. Quite often nowadays people try to water down the power of death – at funerals we say 'he had a good life' 'it's a celebration' - No, death is awful, terrible, not to be underestimated as an enemy, an

affront to how God made things to be in the beginning. God's plan does not include death – He is a God of life.

And so the Christian gospel uniquely promises abundant life. How can there be a promise of abundant life if God is not stronger than Death? If God has not raised Jesus from the dead, then there is no hope that God will raise anyone else. Then, Paul's preaching is in vain; the Corinthians faith is in vain (15:14). And all who have hoped in Christ are to be pitied (15:19).

"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (15:17).

For Paul, the great enemy, "Death," is the sidekick of sin. A little later in the chapter he writes that the sting of death is sin (1 Corinthians 15:56). Likewise, in Romans 6:23, Paul says that the wages of sin are death. According to Romans 5, sin has reigned from the time of Adam, and no one has been able to escape sin's power. All have been enslaved to the superpower of Sin, with a capital "S."²

3 The Resurrection of Jesus and us

For God to defeat Death is the signal that God has defeated the power of Sin. God's resurrection of Jesus is the surety, the first fruit, that God will defeat the powers of Death and Sin for *all* creation. It is the decisive act that has determined God's ultimate victory.

Truth is important to us as Christians, and this truth more than others. The Christian gospel is not simply I being kind to one another and living peaceably. While these are worthy goals, the gospel demands more. At the core of the gospel is a God who refuses to abandon creation to the corrupting powers of sin and death. This a God of *life*. This life means we one day will be resurrected like Christ, a bodily and yet not this mortal body renewal – which means I will be known, by Christ, to be me, not simply subsumed into the place where souls are. It also means our loved ones in Christ will also be known too – we will meet again, we will be loved. As we looked at last week, love never ends.

This truth is vital, Paul says, because it changes our outlook on death – it has been defeated in Christ once and for all. His resurrection shows this – it is not just Christ who is raised, but us with him, as we now say in our creed. (after which time of prayer and silence)