

*St. Alban's Epping, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2019*

## **RESURRECTION REALITY**

**(Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11)**

Over the past three weeks, our lectionary has been taking us through the later chapters of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. We heard about the church as the body of Christ, about the gifts we have been given so that we all can play our part in serving the church community, and last week we heard Paul's powerful and beautiful words about love. I pointed out then that although they are often heard in wedding services, they were originally written to call Christians to treat each other with love, as members of God's family.

Today we move to the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15, from which our readings will come until the beginning of Lent. This chapter of 58 verses is the longest chapter from all the letters in the New Testament. Usually when selections of this chapter are set in the Lectionary every three years they stop only part way through on the Sunday before Lent. But this year is unusual. Easter is very late - April 21<sup>st</sup> - and that means that Lent starts very late. Unusually then, we will be able to have four weeks of readings which will take us right to the end of the chapter. Some of the more detailed arguments from the middle of the chapter are omitted, but we will be able to hear the main things Paul wants to say.

With this in mind, we are going to focus in our sermons over the next four weeks on our readings from this very significant chapter, which focuses on the resurrection of Jesus, why it matters, and what it means for us and for our hope as Christians. You will find a brief note in the bulletin, and there will be the opportunity to explore further in the Rectory Bible Studies starting on Tuesday week.

Resurrection is right at the heart of the Christian Gospel. And Paul makes clear in the opening verses that he did not make up the Gospel: he received it, and as a faithful preacher, he handed it on. He proclaimed it to the Corinthians and they received it. It is on that Gospel that they stand firm, and it is that Gospel that brings them salvation - as indeed it brings us salvation. And that is why it is so important to hold firmly to the message of the Gospel.

And what is that Gospel? "That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures." Those words sound pretty familiar, don't they? They became part of our two main liturgical expressions of faith: the Apostles' Creed, used at baptisms and at Morning and Evening Prayer, and the Nicene Creed, which we say each week as part of the Eucharist.

The New Testament keeps telling us that Christ **died for our sins**: by his death on the cross, he suffered on our behalf and brought us forgiveness, so that our sins are dealt with for ever, and we are reconciled with God. And the writers of the New Testament always made clear that the death of Christ was not a mistake, or an emergency change of plan by God. In the Old Testament scriptures they found many indications that God would deal with the problem of sin through a Saviour whom he would send, and bring forgiveness to all who will receive it. Christ's death is indeed "according to the scriptures".

The next part of this credal statement is that **Christ was buried**. Of course we hear about this in all the Gospels. His body was taken down from the cross late on Good Friday, wrapped in burial cloths, and laid in a cave tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea.

But why did this get into Paul's summary? We take Jesus' burial for granted! Because it emphasizes the reality of Jesus' death. No doubt many people would be sceptical about the story of the resurrection, but Paul follows through the events of Good Friday to make quite clear that Jesus was placed in a tomb, as would be expected of any person who had died.

And then he goes on to the issue he wants to focus on. **Christ was raised on the third day** in accordance with the scriptures. The resurrection is at the heart of Paul's Gospel.

And why is it so important? Without the resurrection, Christ is just a martyr - a good but deluded man, who gathered a band of followers, who told memorable stories and taught important lessons, but who got into trouble with the wrong people, and ended up being executed. Without the resurrection, there is no more story of Jesus after Good Friday.

When trying to explain why Christians believe in such an extraordinary thing as the resurrection, many sceptical writers have looked at what they think might have actually happened once Jesus' body had been placed in the tomb, and a guard placed on duty. Did everyone get confused and go to the wrong tomb, leaving the body of Jesus where it was? Did Jesus' followers, his enemies, or someone else, steal the body? Did Jesus revive in the cool of the tomb, find his way out and convince his followers that he had been miraculously raised to life again?

Explanations like this have been put forward over the centuries, and none of them is really convincing. There is a mystery about the empty tomb. And remember that this story was not invented decades or centuries later, like a dramatic legend. It was told from the earliest days of the church.

Paul of course was not a follower of Jesus around the first Easter. And here he focuses on the first witnesses to the resurrection. He provides quite a list of people who met the risen Jesus. The first person he mentions is Cephas, who is Peter. Paul then adds the twelve apostles, indicating more than one appearance to them. He mentions James, the Lord's brother, who was not a follower of Jesus during his ministry. And he mentions one occasion when more than five hundred people were present: most were still alive, even if some had died. "There are plenty of people who saw him", he seems to be saying. "You can ask them for yourself."

It's a substantial list of people who are witnesses to the risen Jesus. The Gospels have their own lists which overlap with Paul's list, and include some other people as well. One person Paul omits is Mary Magdalene, whom John records as the first to meet the risen Jesus. Why would Paul omit Mary? I don't think it is because he is the woman-hater some people make him out to be. But Paul was a realist. In Israel and no doubt in other places, women were not allowed to give evidence in court. Their word was always open to question. Nowadays one might well say that it is more often the word of men that is open to question! And rather than give ammunition to those who would question the word of a woman, Paul chose some of the other people who were witnesses to the risen Jesus. The Gospels certainly give plenty of attention to the role of the women on that extraordinary Sunday.

The Gospels also make very clear that Jesus was not a phantom or a vision. He could be seen, touched, examined. He cooked, and he ate with the disciples. The risen Jesus was embodied, not just spiritual. It was the same man as they had known before, and yet there was certainly something new and different about him. We are told that people did not always recognize him immediately, and it seems that he could appear and disappear, even when doors were locked.

Paul's emphasis is on those who were witnesses: people who were not expecting to see Jesus after the crucifixion, but to their amazement met the risen Jesus, saw clearly that he had indeed risen, and were convinced to keep following him.

But there is one more witness, and that is Paul himself. "I too am a genuine witness to the risen Jesus", he writes. Of course he is referring to his experience on the road to Damascus, which he sees as much more than a dream or a vision. Paul saw Jesus for real on that road, and he regards himself as a true witness to the resurrection.

Mind you, he knows that he arrived on the scene at the wrong time, and God gave him special treatment. And his past makes him very aware that he did not deserve a place among the apostles. But God was at work, and under God he has been a faithful servant of Christ and his Gospel.

During the Easter season we greet each other saying "Christ is risen", and the response is "He is risen indeed." Paul here is echoing these words. I cannot **prove** that the Easter story is true. There are many who simply say that God doesn't exist or the miracles never happen, and therefore any alternative explanation is more acceptable than the Gospel story. But I **will** say that the Easter story is not a foolish fable. It is based on real events.

And there are good reasons for taking it seriously and indeed in accepting its truth. And when we accept the reality of the resurrection and become followers of Jesus, we can be assured that Jesus is indeed the Saviour of the world, and the bringer of eternal life.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.

*Paul Weaver*