

*St. Aidan's West Epping, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2019*

## **RESURRECTION AND HOPE**

**(Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 5:17-26)**

What happens after you die? It's a question people have been asking since time immemorial. I saw a doctor on a TV drama the other night trying to give an answer to a young child with cancer. What the doctor said was rather beautiful, but I don't think it made things much clearer.

The problem of course is that very few people have died and come back to tell us anything. There are some people miraculously restored to life in the Bible, but they don't give a report of what it was like. There are people who nearly die or whose heart stops beating for a short while who tell us of visions or experiences they have had: but they haven't actually died, and I wouldn't base too much on their stories. And then there is Jesus. He rose from death, as Paul reminded us in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 15, which we began reading last week. And it is through Jesus that we really begin to get an answer to that big question.

Of course there are many different ideas of what happens after we die. Some people say that after you die, that's it. The end. Nothing to be afraid of, nothing to look forward to. You have to make the most of life here and now, because that's all there is. That's not what Christians believe.

In Paul's day, many people believed in a shadowy half-world: Sheol, the pit. There you weren't dead, but you weren't really alive. It was a world of shadows. You hear it mentioned in some of the Psalms. But that's not what Christians believe.

Many believe in the soul marching on in some way. The body dies, but the soul continues on, unhindered by the body. But that's not what the New Testament teaches.

Some think of a vague world of angels and clouds and harps. But you won't find much of that in the New Testament either.

Others believe in reincarnation: an endless cycle of lives on earth, where we hope that next time will be better than this time. If life is difficult this time, it means that last time we were probably pretty bad, even though we have no memory or knowledge of what we had done. I must admit I find reincarnation a rather depressing theory. And it is certainly not found in the scriptures.

Some believe that if you're good enough you'll go to a better place, but if you're bad enough you'll go to a bad place. But how can we know if we're being good enough?

Paul however insists on **resurrection** as the key to our future and our Christian hope. To Paul, our hope is not vague or uncertain; it is not circular or partial. And in his day, when the prevailing idea around Greece was about survival of the soul, Paul wanted to make clear a much greater reality.

Christians who came from a Greek background would have found the idea of resurrection rather strange. Many of them would have been told before their conversion that the body is a prison from which we will eventually escape. The body is a hindrance to living a truly spiritual life. Some teachers said that it might as well be indulged to the full, because it had no real value or significance anyway. Others said that the body should be disciplined harshly, to make clear that it was of no real significance.

In today's passage from 1 Corinthians 15, Paul wants to show why the resurrection of Jesus really matters, and why the reality of **the resurrection of the body** is so important. And, in a way which you might have thought a bit convoluted, he follows through the logic of those who deny the reality of the resurrection. What if there **is** no resurrection? What if Jesus did not rise from the dead?

And of course, the two questions are inseparable. If resurrection simply does not happen, then Christ did not rise. And if Christ did not rise, there is no resurrection hope for Christians.

But let's see **five disastrous implications** of the idea that there was and there is and there will be no resurrection. Paul spells them out in our passage.

The first implication is that **the Gospel is false**. Christian preaching is useless and pointless. After all, the Christian message is not good advice: it is Good News. But if there was and is no resurrection, there is no truth in the Gospel message.

The second implication is that **Christian faith is useless**. We exercise faith in many ways. For instance, going down a hill in our car, we trust that the brakes will work. We're in big trouble if they don't! Our brakes need to be worthy of our faith in them. To ensure that they are worthy, they are checked when the car is serviced from time to time, and we have them looked at if something happens to raise our concern. As Christians, we also need to have confidence that the Christian message is true, and that Jesus is worthy of our faith. If the Gospel is not true, it is no use.

In our reading last week, Paul pointed out that many people had seen the risen Jesus for themselves: there were many reliable witnesses to the resurrection. He wanted to make clear that our faith is solidly based, and Jesus did indeed rise from the dead.

The third worrying implication if the resurrection is not a reality is that **Christians are telling untruths about God**. We preach and believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. But if he did not do that at all, we are telling lies about God. How will God feel about that? Through the Gospel we would be pointing people away from the truth. We insist that false doctrine must be avoided in our preaching of the Gospel. How would God respond to this false teaching?

And perhaps an even more worrying implication is that **we are all unforgiven**. How do we know that our sins are forgiven? Because of the death of Christ on our behalf on the cross. But why do we believe that Christ's death did us any good? Because he rose from the dead, showing that God had accepted his sacrifice for us, and also making clear that Jesus is indeed the Lord and Saviour. Without the resurrection, Jesus' death is just a sad martyrdom, a tragedy. It does us no good, and we remain sinners with no claim or expectation of forgiveness.

Paul sums it all up by saying that without the resurrection, **Christians are pitiable people**. Christians are people who have been fooled into believing something that is not true, and making sacrifices for ideas that are not true. Christians in those days were a small minority, often suspected of all sorts of unsavoury practices, and often excluded from the ordinary life of the day. Sometimes they were victims of persecution, as Paul himself was.

It wasn't easy to be a Christian. If the Gospel is not true, if Christ has not been raised, all the struggle and sacrifice and service had been a waste.

Nowadays in a country like Australia, few Christians face persecution or attack. Nevertheless our faith must make a difference in the way we live and act, the way we spend our time, the attitudes we hold, and the way we treat people. Living out our faith makes a difference. If the resurrection is not a reality, if our lives are based on a falsehood, Paul insists that Christians deserve pity, not admiration. The Gospel of Christ stands or falls on the reality of Christ's resurrection. And our hope is based on the wonderful reality of resurrection.

Our passage ends with a **big "but"!** **"But"**, says Paul, "in fact, Christ **has** been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died."

The first fruits of a crop were offered to the Lord in thanksgiving. They were a sign of all the grain that would in time be harvested. Paul says that the resurrection of Jesus is like that: it is the beginning of a great harvest of resurrected people. It expresses confident hope of God's promised eternal blessings.

As Christ was raised from death, so we who trust and follow him will be raised in resurrection: we will share with Christ in his glorious kingdom. And as the chapter goes on, Paul will explain more of what that involves. Right now of course, we can't see our hope in all its great reality: we can't give a complete answer to that question of what will happen after we die.

But we have what we need to go on, and what we need to live by. As Christ was raised in glory, so we will rise and share in the fullness and glory of his eternal kingdom. Our faith is not foolishness. It is based on the truth of the resurrection, and the truth of God's Gospel. Let us keep trusting the crucified and raised and living Christ. And let us keep following him along the path of life, which is in fact the path to the fullness of eternal life. Amen.

*Paul Weaver*