

*Raised!*

For a fourth week we find ourselves this morning as a 21<sup>st</sup> century congregation of Christ's church in Amsterdam looking back to a 1<sup>st</sup> century church in ancient Corinth. And we have seen previously that this was a church somewhat in crisis, where conflicts and power-plays were undermining its radical and revolutionary witness to the city in which it was set. This church had succeeded in breaking the social-political mould of Corinth and displaying something new and different – but now, alas, it was being squeezed back into the mould of the city.

This morning we come to one crucial point of contention in the church, and that concerned the resurrection of Christ – and, by implication, the nature of our resurrection, yours and mine. It seems that the people of Corinth were struggling with the idea of a physical resurrection – that Christ was raised in his body, such that his tomb was empty. So it is likely that the Corinthians could envisage some sort of life after death: they could accept that an immortal soul lives on after the body has died, but the idea of Christ's body and our bodies being physical raised? Well, that was considered nonsense, as we'll see.

So this morning I want to consider this subject of the resurrection.

Usually it's a topic reserved for Easter, but there is always so much to say then that is good to consider it now, apart from the hothouse atmosphere of Easter. After all – and this is the first point I want to make this morning - as far as Paul is concerned, belief in Christ's physical resurrection is central and vital to the Christian faith. Paul really stresses this. Listen again: 'if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. Or again, 'if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins...' In other words, if Christ has not been raised then Paul is wasting his time and so is everyone else, including you and me. It really does matter that much. And Paul's insistence here forces us to face up to what we are really dealing with in the Christian faith, what Christianity is all about. Last week I suggested that it is wrong to construe Christianity as simply a philosophy of life, a sort of theoretical system that makes sense of the world and life in it. The ancient world was stuffed with such philosophies and belief-systems, but Christianity is different. It is not a philosophy, it is a story, a narrative,

grounded in certain things that we claim to have happened – and Christ’s resurrection from a grave outside Jerusalem is a crucial one. And the task of the Christian is to live the story and to pass it on. But nor is Christianity primarily an ethic – and let me explain what I mean. For many people being a Christian is all about how to behave, how to distinguish good from bad. In this account being a good Christian is all about ethics and morality. If you say that someone is a good Christian you mean that they are loving and generous and compassionate and a good neighbour. And of course there is truth in that in Christian faith, but it is set in a far wider framework, within far broader horizons. The ethics of the Christian faith are set in the context of a great plan of God’s to create a new heavens and a new earth and to undo the catastrophic effects of sin and evil – and Christ’s resurrection is central to all that. Without it our faith is in vain. So the earliest Christian confession of faith was not that Jesus Christ is a better philosopher than Socrates. And early Christianity was not founded on the proclamation that ‘Jesus tells us to love’. The earliest proclamation was ‘Jesus is Lord’ and that means a risen, living Lord.

So the resurrection is crucial and this brings us to the second point which is that the resurrection – Christ’s and ours – is physical. And why was it that the Corinthians disputed this and had a hard time believing it? Well it was because they, like the rest of the ancient world, were influenced by Greek philosophy and Greek philosophy was profoundly suspicious of matter, of the material. For them, salvation was all about escaping the physical. The body was seen as an encumbrance, a prison, something to be released from. So the great Stoic philosopher Seneca who lived around the same time as Jesus could say, ‘For this body of ours is a weight upon the soul... as the load presses down the soul is crushed and is in bondage... so the soul, imprisoned as it has been in this gloomy and darkened house, seeks the open sky whenever it can, and in the contemplation of the universe finds rest.’ So at death the immortal soul is released from the tomb of the body, escaping it, freed from bondage to the material.

And of course what is so interesting is that that is precisely what has usually been believed in Christian circles. We speak of the soul leaving the body and heaven is pictured as some sort of disembodied state where we flap around like ghosts. And that is precisely what Paul is countering here. Jesus did not come to free our souls for some non-material heaven. He came to plant the

seed of a new heaven and a new earth where we will be not less physical but more!

Some of you may know the book 'The Great Divorce' by the great Christian writer C.S. Lewis. It's about a bus-trip from hell to heaven, where on arriving in heaven the passengers discover that it is far more physical than the world they are used to and that in contrast they are just ghosts, immaterial and insubstantial. As the narrator puts it on arriving in heaven, 'It was the light, the grass, the trees that were different; made of some different substance, so much solidier than things in our country that men were ghosts by comparison.' And so the visitors find that it hurts to walk on the grass: as Lewis puts it, 'reality is harsh to the feet of shadows'. That's great! Resurrected reality is harsh to the feet of shadows, which is all that we are at present. It is now that we are the ghosts – not then. Resurrection will be a heightening of our physicality, a more complete materiality. As Paul puts it elsewhere, we shall be further clothed, further en-fleshed, not less. Resurrection life will be as different from this life as a flower is from a seed, a dragonfly from a waterbug, but it will be no less physical.

This, of course, makes Christianity the most material of religions, the most physical. In what we call the Incarnation God takes on flesh and blood in Jesus of Nazareth and the resurrection is his refusal to let it go. And that is why science can flourish on Christian soil because the physical, material world is the theatre of God's glory as the great reformer John Calvin put it. And that is why art can flourish on Christian soil because art celebrates the joys of colour and touch and sense and sound and the physical raising of Jesus rejoices in all that. And that is why the Christian faith historically has provided hospitals and care for the sick and the poor because bodies matter and if they are to be raised with Christ then they require dignity and honour now.

All of which leads us to one last point: what does it mean to anticipate the resurrection that awaits us in the new heavens and the new earth? What does it mean to live here and now in the light of the coming resurrection and renewal of all things? Because resurrection is not just to be a future hope, it is also to be a present reality. Well, here I would take a cue from the word 'raised': Christ is 'raised' and this surely indicates a kind of elevating of human life, a lifting it up to a higher level. Raising suggests perhaps a kind of intensification of human life, a going beyond what is 'normal' and customary. So, for example, a couple of weeks ago we looked at the great chapter about

love in this letter of Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 13, which celebrates an intense and practical love that is more about the will than the emotions. And this is a love that does not give up, that is prepared to go one step beyond what might be reasonably expected, that ‘believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things’. This is human life ‘raised’. Or think of our reading from Luke’s Gospel today and Jesus’ revolutionary teaching about loving enemies, doing good to those who hate us, blessing and praying for those who abuse us, turning the other cheek. This is human life raised, human existence elevated above the earthbound rules and protocols that are normally considered adequate and reasonable. Here is an intensification of human existence. And with it goes a yearning to see lives lifted from wherever they have fallen and been diminished – be it the sinner or the prisoner, the refugee or the homeless or the sick. Here, where life has fallen from its created glory, the Gospel speaks of being raised with Christ - now.

Perhaps, too, this inseparable bond between us and our bodies can prompt us to live more peacefully, more harmoniously with our material setting, our environment, with nature. The belief that there is some sort of detached, disembodied human soul that is released from our body too easily relegates the natural to the disposable. The separation of the soul from the body is a negative verdict on the body and with it on all of nature and the environmental crisis is evident testimony to that. And it is a belief in the resurrection of the body that can reconnect us with nature and raise us up now to a peaceful and harmonious relationship with our surroundings.

I’m sure you’ve noticed – Spring is in the air, and this past week we have seen signs of it. There have been some beautiful days of clear blue skies and of sunlight and the snowdrops and the crocuses and the daffodils are appearing. Listen for the Word of God and see all these bursts of new life as signs of the whole world, even now, being held in the grip of resurrection. Raise your eyes, raise your thoughts and consider what is taking place around you. Delight in the senses – in sight and colours and the breath of the air on your skin. Give thanks for matter, for the physical world, for nature. Let it’s glory make you curious and inquisitive about it. And let it raise you to resurrection life where love is more daring, and where the extraordinary becomes commonplace, and where all of life is elevated – in anticipation of that great rising on the last day. Amen.

Eternal and loving God,  
all glory and praise and honour be yours this day!  
We gather to lift hearts and voices,  
bodies and spirits to worship you.  
We praise you our Maker,  
And we praise you for the gift of life,  
and we praise you for every sign of new life  
that surrounds us at this time of year.  
We praise you for buds on branches,  
for flowers breaking through the earth,  
for sunlight and showers and fresh air.  
All that you have made gives you praise  
and proclaims the Creator God and the Spirit of life.  
O God forgive us for our resistance to your Spirit.  
Forgive us for our reluctance to live to the full  
and to ensure fullness of life for others.  
Forgive us for our captivity to things that  
Make us less than what you have made us to be.  
Give us, we pray, a love for all that you have made –  
the beauty and wonder of nature,  
the glory of another human being,  
the delights of our senses.  
And so raise us up, loving God.  
Even as you will one day raise us up,  
and with us a while new world,  
so raise us now by your Spirit  
to true and faithful living.  
We pray all these things in Jesus' name  
and we pray further in the words he taught us, saying...