

<sup>35</sup> But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' <sup>36</sup> Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. <sup>37</sup> And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. <sup>38</sup> But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

<sup>42</sup> So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. <sup>43</sup> It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. <sup>44</sup> It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. <sup>45</sup> Thus it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. <sup>46</sup> But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. <sup>47</sup> The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. <sup>48</sup> As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. <sup>49</sup> Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

<sup>50</sup> What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

St Paul's tone in this passage seems somewhat impatient, even slightly rude, when in verse 36 he says 'Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.' I'm told by some learned commentators that he's not really being rude. Apparently Paul is using a common way of developing the point he wants to make, but still, it seems to me that it's a perfectly reasonable question to ask, 'how are the dead raised, with what kind of body do they come?' and not at all foolish.

I suspect it's a question that many of us have. We believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, but how resurrection actually works and how it will work for us is all a bit of a mystery.

In the community in which I grew up there was a lot of certainty about what happens when we die, but it began to seem to me that we were certain about things that didn't quite add up. I wasn't sure how resurrection of the body fitted in with the commonly held idea of being wandering spirits in a celestial heaven while walking the streets of gold and playing a harp. I resolved all those questions by resolving not to bother trying to resolve them – there will be resurrection, there will be a new form of existence, there will be a new heaven and a new earth I'm happy to leave it at that and wait for the surprise. So, when I read Paul saying, 'Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies' I want to say: "Hold on a minute, my friend. You may have it all sorted out and clear in your mind, but be patient with those of us who don't."

I want, at the outset of this sermon, to say that if you're a fellow struggler, someone committed to following Jesus, someone who believes in his death and resurrection, someone who with a full heart can give thanks to God for his grace and mercy to us in Christ, but who struggles with what the Bible is saying about life after death, don't think you're alone – you're not, don't panic, and don't give up.

Last Sunday Pastor Lance give us a great sermon on the resurrection and a wonderful illustration in the children's talk about the pond bug and the dragonfly. So, if you weren't here last week, go to the website and have a listen or read the text of his sermon. You will benefit from it, greatly.

This morning I want to take time to reflect on two things that arise from Paul's teaching on the resurrection in this passage:

- A recurring pattern we see in the NT of death giving birth to new life;
- What it means to bear the image of Jesus (v.49).

### **1. Death giving birth to new life**

Our text tells us that:

‘What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable.’

‘It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.’

This pattern of death giving birth to new life is not just about physical death but is central to the Christian faith. Throughout the NT we are told that Jesus' death was purposeful and necessary to give birth to a new kind of life in his resurrection. It appeared to the disciples that his death was a disaster; we hear two of them on the road to Emmaus lament what might have been: ‘We had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel’. Meanwhile, the other disciples are locked in an upper room in Jerusalem worried that the authorities will come for them next. The situation seems to be hopeless – but that apparent hopelessness is transformed into incredible boldness and confidence as they discover that Jesus' death gives way to resurrection when they meet the risen Christ.

The disciples' experience marks the beginning of understanding this pattern of death giving birth to new life, which can be traced in different ways through the New Testament. It is the major feature in our reading for today: at death our physical bodies will be like seeds in the ground, dying to give rise to something new. There's continuity but difference – there's the death of the seed which is no more, but arising from it is the fruit that was always contained within it.

Writing to the church in Rome, Paul speaks about how that pattern of death giving birth to life is demonstrated in Baptism:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

In baptism we are united with him in his death and that identification with him gives birth to a new kind of life. Paul explains what this new kind of life is – it is one that now lives for God. He says:

When Christ died, he died for sin once and for all. But now he is alive, and he lives only for God. <sup>11</sup> In the same way, you must think of yourselves as dead to the power of sin. But Christ Jesus has given life to you, and you live for God.

In practical terms that means not allowing our bodies to be used for wickedness but consciously using our bodies, our gifts and abilities for righteous purposes. It means a new focus for life. It means living by the values of the Kingdom of God that Jesus taught and lived out in his own life. Believing in Jesus' death and resurrection is an invitation to come and die: die to selfishness, die to self-centredness, die to wickedness and sin and die every day to these things. But it is also an invitation to come and live: live as a witness to the Kingdom of God, live a life by the values of that Kingdom taught and demonstrated by Jesus:

Give yourselves to God, as people who have been raised from death to life. Make every part of your body a slave that pleases God.

This pattern of death giving birth to new life is not restricted to an understanding of what happens after our physical death – it is central to our understanding of what it means to become, to be, a follower of Jesus. Therefore, perhaps Paul's apparent impatience in verse 34 is not simply a rhetorical device as some suggest. Perhaps Paul is genuinely frustrated that, after all his teaching about baptism and about dying with Christ and rising to new life with Christ, people still haven't grasped that when you are dealing with God, this pattern of death giving birth to new life holds good for this life and the next.

There is, however, one particular theme that Paul highlights in connection with the pattern of death giving birth to new life – it is the theme of reconciliation.

When writing to the church in Rome he takes time to explain this connection between Jesus' death and the birth of a new life in which we are reconciled with God. He speaks about how

God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, (Romans 5)

And so, though Jesus' death and resurrection we have now received reconciliation.

Paul picks up and develops this theme of reconciliation in his second letter to the church in Corinth. You sense in his second letter that he's very conscious of his own mortality – he's much more reflective on death than in his first letter, which is pretty dogmatic on the issue. He talks about the physical body as being like a tent – an obvious metaphor coming from a professional tentmaker. He says:

For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling— so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

In the same section of his second letter to the Corinthians he makes a connection between this mortal being swallowed up by life – death giving birth to new life – and reconciliation. Knowing this not only changes how we view our own destiny but how we view other people here and now:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

This reality changes both how we choose to live our own lives and how we live with others. This reality of death giving birth to life means that we can't relate to the people around us from what Paul calls 'a human point of view'. Just as there is a different way of seeing the very human Jesus because of the resurrection, so there should be a difference in the way we see our fellow humans. So, we cannot separate out the blessing of resurrection hope from our calling as agents of reconciliation here and now.

We together, all of us, are bound into this ministry of reconciliation; it comes as part of the new life birthed through Jesus' death. This doesn't mean the church as a denominational structure setting up a ministry of reconciliation and appointing people to be responsible – it means it is a shared calling upon us all as those birthed into newness of life in Jesus.

Some years ago I had the privilege of visiting Uganda and staying in the town and district of Arua and hearing of historical tensions as well as current violence and destruction – the Lord's Army. The Anglican News Service carried an account of reconciliation that took place in Uganda just last week that demonstrates something of this ministry of reconciliation.

In February 1977 Archbishop Luwum was arrested on the instructions of Idi Amin. He was a leading voice in the criticism of Idi Amin. He delivered a note of protest to the dictator regarding unexplained disappearances and murders. The Archbishop was arrested with two cabinet members and the three men were placed on display at a rally in Kampala. The following day, authorities announced he had died in a car crash, but when his body was

handed to relatives it was found that he had been shot at least four times through the mouth and chest. After his death, he was declared a martyr by the Church of England, and in 2016, President Museveni declared February 16 a public holiday in the Archbishop's memory.

The report records that last week, during the holiday, Canon Stephen Gelenga, from the same tribe as Amin, delivered an emotional apology to the Archbishop's family and the people of his tribe. He said:

What happened during the reign of Idi Amin, who is my kinsman, we still feel the pain after forty years. As the new generation, we need to put to an end all the bad past and we move forward as reconciled Ugandans. Ugandans cannot heal this country if we pay evil for evil.

The report goes on to say that Christians from Kakwa met with Archbishop Luwum's widow at their family home where they held prayers together. "Mama Luwum forgave us; we slept at their home, we asked for forgiveness on behalf of the people who sinned. We also want to forgive those who wronged us during the time." The retired local Bishop of Kitgum, said: "After 40 years, the people of Kakwa asked for forgiveness for the killing of Archbishop Luwum, the people of Arua, Koboko and the people of Uganda are witnessing this great miracle happening."

This deliberate act of reconciliation is an example of the new life given birth through the death of Christ and our identification with him. The ministry of reconciliation calls us to die to old enmities and the prejudices we inherit within our community – to no longer regard others from a merely human point of view but to see them in the light of the new life given birth through Jesus' death.

As we see from the example in Uganda, exercising the ministry of reconciliation is not time bound. There is no statute of limitations when it comes to addressing the wrongs of the past which we continue to harbour and inhabit, whether that is within our family, our church, our community or between the nations.

So, if we truly believe that in Christ death gives birth to new life, if we hold that hope for ourselves and others in the context of our physical death, then let us strive for consistency in our belief and be consciously, deliberately, agents of reconciliation.

## **2. Bearing the image of Jesus**

I find the phrase that Paul uses in v.49 of our reading intriguing:

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will<sup>[k]</sup> also bear the image of the man of heaven.

It echoes something that John says in his first letter:

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

Both John and Paul are reflecting the theme that death will give birth to life and both are saying that we – you and I – will bear the image of the risen Christ; indeed, John says not just that we will see him but that 'we will be like him'. I don't know about you, but I find this disturbing. I can relate to worshipping the risen Jesus, I can relate to obeying him – that's fine, that's appropriate. I'm not claiming to do either of those things well, but both seem appropriate; both speak of a grateful response in the light of his Lordship; but the idea of being like him, of bearing his image perfectly – that I find overwhelming. I almost don't want to believe it; it feels too much to handle, too much grace. I feel I'll spoil something of the glory, the beauty, if I'm allowed to be that close to Jesus – and I've got to wrestle with the implications of that.

Here's the thing: when a person signs up to a particular role in life, we expect them to assume and demonstrate the values of that role, expect them to live up to their office. We expect doctors to keep their promise to heal rather than harm. We expect police to maintain the law and live by the law. We expect clergy to live a life consistent with their vocation. We expect engineers to know the limits of construction. It might be a police recruit's first day, or a junior doctor's first ward round or a minister's first charge, but we expect them to live their vocation – however new to the job or inexperienced they may be.

It strikes me that however disturbed I may be about the idea of being like Jesus, however much that may unnerve me, that's part of the deal, that's the implication of dying with Christ in baptism and rising to walk in this new life. What I need to do is get over my insecurities and uncertainties and start living up to my future, start thinking about what it means to bear the image of the man from heaven, what it means to 'be like him'.

There's a whole world of books and websites on what's known as 'visualisation', the idea that if you imagine something in your mind you can make it happen. It ranges from the snake oil sales – the extreme of offering techniques that will enable you to become a billionaire by activating 'the law of attraction', whatever you need will come to you to techniques used by elite athletes under the direction of sports psychologists in which the athletes rehearse their skills and visualise the outcome in their minds just as much as doing the physical exercise.

Dr Jennifer Cumming of the University of Birmingham speaks about how visualisation means using all of your senses (e.g., see, feel, hear, taste, smell) to rehearse your sport in your mind. It helps: to get the most out of training (top athletes use imagery extensively to build on their strengths and help eliminate their weaknesses); to compete more effectively

(it helps to regulate anxiety and helps to stay confident and focused); to help stay motivated along the way (a tool that can help to maintain a vision of what we would like to achieve).

I don't want to become a religious psychological snake oil salesman; but if one day we will be like Jesus and bear his image perfectly, it strikes me we should be visualising what that might look like in order to live faithfully to what we will become, in order to live more effectively as Christians and stay motivated as we run the race of discipleship.

When we consider ourselves worthless and our lives pointless, we need to remember that one day we will bear the image of the man from heaven and be encouraged. When we are caught in deep despair, then we need to remember that when we see him we will be like him and know that we are loved

I don't know whether you have ever read one of the many books exploring the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus? There are many of them, recording and comparing the gospel events, addressing what appear as anomalies in the text, comparing the evidence against contemporary historical records. They can be really interesting, enlightening and challenging. But the real evidence for the resurrection is not to be found in such books, it's to be found in the lives of the people who have died with Christ and are raised to newness of life and striving to work out what that should look like in the here and now.

Indeed, it is fascinating to note what happens immediately after 1Corinthians 15.

It ends with this wonderful doxology:

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."<sup>[h]</sup>

"Where, O death, is your victory?  
Where, O death, is your sting?"<sup>[i]</sup>

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

When I say ends – that's only because of the chapter heading and verses introduced to the text much later on. What actually happens is this:

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do.

The believers in Jerusalem were in difficulty and Paul was gathering relief offerings – visualising what we will be is as practical as providing for the poor!

We have explored two themes: the pattern of death giving birth to new life; the idea that we will bear the image of Jesus – and one day we will truly be like him.

Thinking about the resurrection and the pattern of death giving birth to new life brought us to the ministry of reconciliation that has been entrusted to us; the anticipation that one day we will bear the image of the man from heaven brought us to the responsibility to imagine what that might look like and live it today.

Brothers and sisters:

May the resurrection of Jesus be for you

- Comfort in life's trials and bereavements;
- Encouragement to be God's agents of reconciliation;
- Encouragement to visualise and live out your future when you will be like Jesus.