

1 COR 15.20-22: DEATH IS NOT THE END!

[Chelmsford 4 November 2013]

Is death the end?

Yes, say today's modern atheists.

- To quote Richard Dawkins: "*Be thankful that you have a life, and forsake your vain and presumptuous desire for a second one.*"
- Similarly wheel-chair bound scientist Stephen Hawking has said: "*There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark*".

No say most Britons. According to the latest statistics, over half of Britons today believe in an after-life; and that around seven in 10 believe in a soul.

This morning, however, I don't want to argue for an after-life – but rather for the sure and certain hope of resurrection. There is nothing attractive about an after-life which offers just more of the same – but the Christian hope of resurrection is of a life free of pain, tears, and suffering – a life lived in the presence of God. Now that is something worth believing.

Yes, on this morning, when we are giving thanks for loved ones who have died this past year, I want to assure you that death is not the end. For those who have entrusted their lives to God's safe-keeping, a new life awaits. And this hope of new life is based on the resurrection of Jesus. Listen to the Apostle Paul "**The truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will be raised**". (1 Cor 15.22)

1. JESUS HAS BEEN RAISED FROM DEATH

It was Lenin who said: "*If I could see a man still alive after top of head chopped off, I would believe in life after death*". Lenin was not the first to think in that vein.

Thomas, when told by his fellow disciples "**We have seen the Lord**", replied: "**Unless I see the scar of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe**" (John 20.25).

To Thomas it was beyond belief that a man crucified should rise.

Certainly, there was no mistaking that Jesus had died. The Roman soldiers were professionals - death was their trade. They knew a dead man when they saw one - indeed, just to make sure, they pierced Jesus' side.

Yet within 8 days Thomas joined with disciples in proclaiming that Jesus is alive.

What had happened? For dead men don't live.

BUT here we are dealing with no ordinary man.

We are dealing with Jesus the Son of God.

Indeed, we are dealing with God himself: for it was God who raised his Son from the dead, the God who made the heavens & the earth.

Set within that context the idea of resurrection is still surprising, but it is not incredible. For if God be God, then surely all things are possible for him.

But someone might object: "It's all right for you to assert the resurrection on the basis of New Testament, but what other evidence have you got to convince me?"

We have, of course, no video recording of the event - all we have is circumstantial evidence.

Yet such circumstantial evidence does not weaken our case.

There are facts relating to resurrection of Jesus which require an explanation, just as much as a bloodstained axe and fingerprints at the scene of a murder require explanation.

Let's look at just three facts among a host of evidence:

FACT 1: Jesus died as a young man.

Only a handful of people have founded great movements, and made a really decisive impact on history. Each of them needed time in which to make their influence felt. For example:

- Confucius (the great Chinese teacher) died in 479 BC, aged 72
- Gautama the Buddha (the founder of Buddhism) died in 483 BC, aged 80
- Muhammad the prophet (the founder of Islam) died in AD 632, aged 62
- Karl Marx (the great mind behind communism) died in 1883, aged 64.

By contrast Jesus died around AD 30, aged 33.

He spent only 3 years in the public eye, and these were spent in a fairly remote place.

When he died he left no writings, and only a few dispirited, demoralised followers.

And yet we base our whole calendar on his life, and not on the lives of other men.

Every time we write the date we pay an unconscious tribute to his birth.

It has been said that the name of Jesus "*is not so much written, as ploughed, into the history of mankind*" (RW Emerson).

How do you explain this? Some fairly major explanation must be found.

I would suggest to you that only the fact that fits is that God raised his Son from the dead.

FACT 2: Many people claimed to have seen Jesus after his death

Take the apostle Paul

At one stage he was the chief enemy of what he regarded as a heretical movement.

And yet he was turned round in his tracks by meeting the risen Lord on the Damascus Road.

Listen to his testimony here in 1 Cor 15:8: "**Last of all he appeared also to me**"

If it wasn't Jesus, then who did he see? Or what was it he saw?

And before you say, Paul was just suffering from sunstroke on that day, don't forget that there were plenty of others who were likewise convinced that they had met with the Risen Lord. At the beginning of this chapter Paul refers to Jesus having appeared to "**more than 500 of his followers at once**" (1 Cor 15.6).

Nobody can claim these people were hallucinating - because hallucinations happen to individuals. True, under the influence of drugs, a group of people could hallucinate, but each one would experience different hallucinations, for these arise from the subconscious mind, and every individual's subconscious is as personal as his fingerprints.

So how do you account for these so-called "appearances"?
If there was no resurrection, then what's your explanation?

FACT 3: The disciples suffered for their preaching

People normally tell lies to get out of trouble, not to get into trouble! But as it was, the disciples persecuted for their constant assertion that God had raised Jesus from the dead.

E.g. When he was at Athens the Apostle Paul was jeered at for speaking about "**a raising from death**" (Acts 17.32).

It is difficult to believe that Paul and his fellow disciples were making up a story.

John Young: "*Men will suffer and die for their convictions, but not for their inventions*".

Add to this fact, two other facts:

1. **No one produced the body** The easiest way for the Jews to have stopped the disciples' preaching would have been to produce the body of Jesus. Instead, they circulated the report that the disciples had stolen the body. The evidence for their case was wanting.
2. **The tomb was not venerated.** True, today modern tourists go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land and are taken to see what is claimed to be the tomb of Jesus, but this sort of practice only started some 200-300 years after death of Jesus. This is strange, in so far as tomb veneration was common in the time of Jesus. People would often meet for worship at the grave of a dead prophet. But the first Christians didn't. Why not? The only explanation that fits is because the tomb was empty!

But let's move on. For Paul was concerned not just to assert that God raised Jesus from the dead. He went on: "**But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised**". (1 Cor 15.22)

2. JESUS GUARANTEES LIFE FOR US TOO!

Paul argued not only for the certainty of the resurrection of Jesus - but also for the inevitability of our rising from the dead. He wrote the risen Lord Jesus is "**the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised**".

Or at least, that is how the GNB puts it.

Literally, he says Jesus is "**the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep**".

To understand what Paul saying, have to know something about the Jewish Passover Festival:

- it not only commemorated the deliverance of the people of God from Egypt
- it was also a kind of harvest festival - for the Passover was always celebrated when the barley harvest was due.

Before the harvest was brought in, a rather strange ceremony always took place in the temple at Jerusalem. For in Lev 23.10,11 God is recorded as saying: "**When you enter the land that I am giving you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first-fruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall raise the sheaf before the Lord, that you may find acceptance; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall raise it**" (NRSV). Only then could the new barley be bought or sold in shops or bread made from the flour.

This sheaf of corn or barley was described as the "**first fruits**", in the sense that it was the sign of a much bigger harvest to come.

So too, says Paul, the resurrection of Jesus was the "**first fruits**" in the sense that it was the sign of the resurrection of all believers to come.

At first sight this may seem a rather strange picture for Paul to use. But for Paul and his fellow Jewish believers it was an amazingly apt parallel: because God raised Jesus from the dead on the morning after the Sabbath of Passover, when this ceremony of the first-fruits actually took place in the temple of Jerusalem.

OK: explanation rather involved.

Hence the GNB translation goes for a paraphrase which is equivalent in meaning.

Jesus is "**the guarantee that those who sleep in death shall be raised**".

What's more, unlike many guarantees today, there is no small print to this promise....

This if an offer without any condition. Or rather, it is an offer with only one condition.

And the condition is this: that we have to belong to him

3. JESUS GUARANTEES LIFE FOR THOSE WHO BELONG TO HIM

Listen to the Apostle Paul: The truth is that Christ has been raised from death as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised. . . . **For just as all people die because of their union with Adam, in the same way all will be raised to life because of their union with Christ**" (20,22). In the very next verse Paul speaks of the resurrection of "**those who belong to him** (Christ)" (v23).

In other words, there is nothing automatic about our sharing in God's new life Jesus gives life to those who have entrusted their lives to God's safe-keeping

Almost every funeral I take I begin with the words of Jesus found in John 11.25: "**I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live**". These words of reassurance are offered to those who "**believe**"

We do not as of right share in the risen life of Jesus.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, more than 50% of the people in this country claim to believe in life beyond death - and yet a large % of this 50% would not claim to be Christian.

Nonetheless they have this belief that death cannot really be the end.

No doubt many of them would happily identify with the famous quotation about the afterlife by Henry Scott Holland: "*Death is nothing at all... I have only slipped away into the next room. I am I and you are you. Whatever we were to each other that we are still. Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was; there is absolutely unbroken continuity. Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight? I am waiting for you for an interval, somewhere very near, just around the corner. All is well*".

But these words were penned by a Christian minister - they only have relevance to those who have committed their lives to Jesus.

Paul in this very same letter speaks of humankind being in two categories: there are those who are being saved, and those who are being lost.

He wrote, e.g. "**For the message about Christ's death on the cross is nonsense to those who are being lost; but for us who are being saved it is God's power**" (1 Cor 1.18).

The Christian message at the point of death is not: "*All will be well - whatever*". That is sentimental untruth. Rather it is: "*All will be well for those who have put their trust in the crucified and Risen Lord Jesus*".

When my father died, I put into *The Times* a notice of his death.

I ended the death notice with these words: of the Apostle Paul: "**Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ**" (1 Cor 15.57).

The fact is that Jesus has conquered the power of sin and death – he has carved a path through the valley of the shadow – and we by faith may follow him.

Death is not the end for those who love him. Death is but the beginning of a new and more

wonderful life. Here surely is a faith worth having.

A prayer of response: for those who have yet to entrust their lives to Christ. Lord Jesus, I thank you for the good news that you have broken the power of sin and death – for you have brought life and immortality to light. This morning I want to know that I too may share in this victory over sin and death. Come into my heart as my Saviour: forgive me for all that has been wrong in my life; and bless me with a new life which will have no end.

A prayer for those who have committed their lives to Christ. Lord Jesus, I thank you for the comfort of the gospel and for the promise that a day is coming when the dead will be raised and we shall all be changed. Strengthen my faith so that I may know for a certainty that you have taken away the sting of death.