

1 COR 15.57: WHY I AM A CHRISTIAN

[Chelmsford Easter Day 8 April 2012]

For the last three years I have been responsible for finding speakers for my Rotary Club. I was asked to find a speaker for last Wednesday – but I refused. I wrote to the President of the Club, saying that in a week when all my focus was on Jesus, I really would not feel comfortable arranging for someone to come and address us on some secular theme. I said I recognized that, like politics, religion is generally ‘off limits’ in a Rotary Club, but nonetheless could I speak to my fellow Rotarians on ‘Why I am a Christian’. To my amazement the President agreed to my request. So last Wednesday, after a full English breakfast, I shared my faith.

This morning, after a superb Continental breakfast with croissants & pain au chocolat, I intend to do the same. I want to share with you ‘Why I am a Christian’. If you have come this morning wanting a traditional three-point sermon, you will be disappointed. But just as Jed and Jessica will be sharing their faith, so will I. If you want a text for this personal confession of faith, then it is to be found in 1 Cor 15.57: **“Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”**.

Here are words which Paul penned in the context of death
And death is a constant issue in our house.
Caroline, my wife, in her role as HM Coroner for Essex and Thurrock has to deal with some 5000 suspicious deaths a year.
And of course in my role as a minister I often have to deal with death.
But death is not just an issue for coroners and ministers to deal with.
It is an issue we all have to deal with.
As one wit put it, *‘Death and income tax are the two unavoidable certainties in life’*. The big question we all have to face is: Is death the end? Or is there life beyond death?

When Cardinal Hume, the former Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he rang to tell Timothy Wright, the then Abbott of Ampleforth. The abbot said: *‘Congratulations! That’s brilliant news. I wish I was coming with you’!*

One of my great heroes as an 18 year old was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German Christian. I spent my gap year in Germany, doing youth work for German Baptists. At that time I read in German Bonhoeffer’s great book on discipleship, *Nachfolge*. There Bonhoeffer declared: *“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die”*. Wow! When in on April 9th 1945 Bonhoeffer was put to death by Hitler’s henchmen, he declared: *“Death is the supreme festival on the road to freedom”*. As he was taken away to be hanged, he said to a British fellow-prisoner, *“This is the end. For me the beginning of life”*

What a difference Jesus can make to living – and to dying.
It is because of the resurrection of Jesus that I am a Christian.

Yes, there are many other reasons why a person can decide to follow Jesus, but for me this is the key.

The resurrection is at the heart of the Christian faith.

As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: **"If there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors... And if Christ wasn't raised, then all you're doing is wandering about in the dark, as lost as ever... If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we're a pretty sorry lot"** (1 Cor 15.16-19 Peterson).

The resurrection is the first article of the Christian faith and the demonstration of all the rest.

Yes, we have to admit that from a purely rational perspective belief in the resurrection of Jesus is absurd. Dead people do not rise from the dead. Death is always final.

Or is it? Lord Byron in his poem *Don Juan* claimed that there are times when *"truth is... stranger than fiction"*. I believe that the resurrection of Jesus is one of those times.

At this point let me make it clear that faith in the resurrection has nothing to do with blind belief. Christian faith does not involve shutting one's eyes and with the White Queen in Alice believing six impossible things before breakfast.

In preparing for this talk I spoke to my son Timothy, who is a senior lecturer in European thought and philosophy at UCL. He pointed me to the Danish father of existentialism, Soren Kierkegaard, who argued that there is no place for reason – and that if we choose faith we must suspend our reason our reason in order to believe in something higher than reason.

In fact, he said, we believe by virtue of the absurd: *"If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith"*. But he was wrong.

Although faith ultimately transcends reason, it does not displace reason.

Faith and reason can go hand in hand. Christian faith always involves reasonable believing – and this is true even if reason has its limits.

This is true of the resurrection of Jesus.

There is evidence to be weighed; there are facts to be considered.

The oldest book I possess is dated 1749. It is a book entitled: *Observations on the History and Evidences of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* by a man called Gilbert West.

When Gilbert West began his book, he was not a Christian - indeed, he set out to disprove the Christian faith. And so he read the New Testament. But in examining the evidence, the task changed him. Instead of writing a book disproving the resurrection of Jesus, he ended up writing a book which set out the evidence for the resurrection.

Interestingly the title page has a quotation from the Apocrypha: **"Do not find fault before examining the evidence; think first, and criticize afterwards"** (Ecclus 11.7 NEB)

Gilbert West was not the only man to set out to write a book disproving the Christian faith and then come to a different conclusion.

In the late 1920s Frank Morrison, a young journalist, admired the character of Jesus, but felt that his story rested on insecure historical foundations. But when he came to look at the evidence, he had a change of heart and instead wrote a defence of the faith in the resurrection - *Who Moved The Stone?*

In 2003 Tom Wright, the former Bishop of Durham, and now Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St Andrews, wrote *The Resurrection of the Son of God*: 817 pages in length, it is the longest and heaviest book I have on the resurrection of Jesus. After weighing up all the evidence he wrote: “*I conclude that the historian, of whatever persuasion, has no option but to affirm both the empty tomb and the ‘meetings’ with Jesus as ‘historical events’ We cannot account for early Christianity without them*” .

More recently in 2010 Michael Licona, an American scholar, wrote *The Resurrection of Jesus: a new historiographical account* – again another heavy tome. After 718pp he concludes: that Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is “*by far the best historical explanation of the relevant historical bedrock*”

And so I could go on – quoting scholar after scholar.

The fact is that the evidence stacks up, well and truly.

Alas far too many people have never seriously considered the evidence.

In this respect the words of Bible translator JB Philips are quite sobering: “*Over the years I have had hundreds of conversations with people, many of them of higher intellectual calibre than my own, who quite obviously had no idea of what Christianity is really about. I was in no case trying to catch them out; I was simply and gently trying to find out what they knew about the New Testament. My conclusion was that they knew virtually nothing. This I find pathetic and somewhat horrifying. It means that the most important Event in human history is polite and quietly by-passed. For it is not as though the evidence had been examined and found unconvincing; it had simply never been examined*”.

Have you examined the evidence? I have.

As a PhD student I devoted three years of my life examining the implications of the resurrection of Jesus for the early church.

Since then I have taught New Testament in an African university, I have been principal of a theological college, and I have pastored two churches.

After using a sabbatical to further study of the resurrection, I went on to publish a book for preachers on *The Message of the Resurrection*, published in Korean, Chinese & Romanian!.

Today I am more convinced than ever I have been that God raised Jesus from the dead, and that in so doing Jesus broke down death’s defences for all who believe.

The evidence for the empty tomb is overwhelming.

Have you ever noticed, for instance, that all four Gospels agree that women were the first to discover the empty tomb and to receive the news of the Resurrection? No first-century Gospel writer would ever have dreamt of mentioning women as witnesses of the empty tomb, unless it happened to be true. For women in those days did not count; they were not allowed to give evidence in court. And yet in the New Testament the story of the empty tomb rests in the first place on the evidence of the women.

All kinds of weird and wonderful suggestions have been made to explain the empty tomb.

- The women went to the wrong tomb
- Jesus never really died.
- The body was stolen by the disciples.
- The body of Jesus was stolen, but not by the disciples.

But on careful examination none of these arguments holds water. The tomb was empty because God raised Jesus from the dead.

A second major piece of evidence for the resurrection are the appearances of Jesus. Some have suggested that these so-called appearances were subjective visions rather than objective events, akin to the hallucinations the bereaved sometimes experience. But the reality is that the resurrection appearances of Jesus came as a genuine surprise to the disciples – far from looking for an excuse to believe in the resurrection, they were frightened by what they experienced.

Furthermore, the appearances involved not just one or two individuals, but also groups of people – the Apostle Paul even spoke of a group of more than five hundred seeing Jesus at the same time. But hallucinations tend to come to individuals – a group of people never see the same thing, unless there is an objective basis to what they see.

Then there is the fact that the resurrection appearances took place at different times and in different places – whereas by contrast psychic experiences are normally limited to particular times and places.

Murray Parkes in his monumental *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* commenting on the hallucinations experienced by the bereaved, wrote: “*No matter how happy the dream, there must always be a sad awakening*”. But the resurrection traditions of the New Testament never mention any such ‘sad awakening’. There never came a point when they realized it was but a dream.

The fact is that the stories of the empty tomb and of the resurrection appearances are not literary devices to ensure that there is a happy ending to an otherwise tragic tale. Rather they are grounded in reality, grounded in truth.

But that is not all. I am a Christian not just because I believe God raised Jesus from the dead – but because as a result death need not be the end for you and me.

The Apostle Paul put it this way: “**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 15.20).

Similarly the Apostle Peter stated: “**God gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with a living hope**” (1 Peter 1.3). The hope in question is not wishful thinking – but rather hope for the future based upon a past reality.

The Bible teaches that in rising from the dead Jesus has blazed a trail through the valley of the shadow down which those who have put their trust in him may follow too.

Or in the words of Jesus, with which I begin every funeral: **"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live"** (John 11.25).

Jesus makes all the difference – to living and to dying.

Down through the centuries death for many people has been the bleakest of experiences.

- In the ancient world Theocritus declared: *"Hopes are for the living; the dead are without hope"*.
- The 20th century pop-philosopher, Bertrand Russell said much the same: *"There is darkness without, and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendour, no vastness anywhere; only triviality for a moment, and then nothing"*.
- In this 21st century in a poll of over 1000 adults undertaken in the UK, 20% admitted to fearing both the way they will die and death itself; 30% said that they fear the way they will die, but not death itself; interestingly a further 25% couldn't or wouldn't answer questions about death because they found the subject too emotive and too personal. At the very least death makes most people feel very uncomfortable.

The Christian message at the point of death is not: *'All will be well – whatever'*.

That is sentimental untruth. Rather:

'All will be well for those who have put their trust in the Crucified & Risen Lord Jesus'.

Some years ago Caroline and I were guests at a dinner in Cambridge: a fellow-guest was Professor Sir Norman Anderson, a distinguished academic lawyer.

He and his wife Pat had a hard life - for they lived to see their three adult children die.

Their son, Hugh, was a brilliant student: he was President both of the Cambridge Union and of the Cambridge Labour Club, when in 1970 he died of an inoperable brain tumour at the age of 21. A few days later, Prof Anderson gave the 'Thought For The Day' talk on Radio 4. After explaining why he was convinced that God raised Jesus from the dead, he continued: *"On this I am prepared to stake my life. In this my son died, after saying, 'I'm drawing near my Lord'. I am convinced that he was not mistaken"*.

When my father died, we ended his death announcement in *The Times* with the words of my text: **"Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"** (1 Cor 15.57). That is why I am a Christian.

Well, enough of me and my faith. Where do you stand?

Have you discovered the difference that Jesus makes?

On the basis not just of the Scriptures but also of personal experience let me state that Jesus gives us security – he gives us hope – he gives us a future.

Let me urge you this morning to discover for yourself the difference that Jesus makes!