

1 COR 15.26: DEATH A DEFEATED ENEMY!

[Easter Day, Chelmsford 4 April 2010]

At Easter we celebrate life – we celebrate that God raised Jesus from the dead.

“In Assisi, the great basilica, are the bones of St Francis. In Durham, behind the high altar, are the bones of St Cuthbert. But in Jerusalem, under the great rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, you find only an empty tomb”

You say ‘It doesn’t make sense’ – and you are right. Dead men do not rise from the dead. But in Jesus God has done the unthinkable.

All four Gospels are witnesses to this amazing act – for all four Gospels tell of women coming to the tomb and to their *dismay* discovering that it is empty.

Yes, take a look again at the Gospel accounts.

The women were not overjoyed to find the tomb was empty – they were afraid, they were terrified. It is an awesome thing when God is at work.

And before you question the Gospel accounts, think before you question.

The Gospels do not explain the resurrection; it is the resurrection which explains the Gospels. Had God not raised Jesus from the dead, there would have been no Gospel – there would have been no church.

With this preamble let me come to my text to be found in what one Bible translator (JB Phillips) calls the most important chapter in the Bible, viz. 1 Corinthians 15, the chapter in which the Apostle Paul deals with the resurrection of Jesus: **“The last enemy to be conquered is death”**.

If you know your Harry Potter, you will know that it is a quote from *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. For in the book, Harry and Hermione find the quote inscribed on the tombstone of Harry’s parents, Lily and James.

But JK Rowling didn’t make up the quote – it’s from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians.

1. DEATH IS THE LAST ENEMY

Death says Paul is **“the last enemy”** (1 Cor 15.26).

In the past people have sought to defeat death by preserving themselves.

The Egyptian Pharaohs built their pyramids and arranged to have themselves embalmed, so that their mummies would last forever. But the mighty Pharaohs ended up just as dead as their poorest subjects buried in the sand.

By and large we now realize the folly of trying to preserve ourselves.

In the USA, however, there are those who indulge in ‘cryonics’, a procedure that involves freezing a body at the point of death until a cure is found for whatever caused the death.

Goodness knows what they would do if there is a power cut!

Today we seek to defeat death by using a variety of strategies:

1. Some seek to defeat death by avoiding all talk of it.

Death in many circles has become the great unmentionable. *“Dying is the reality that man dare not face and to escape which he summons all his resources”* (Salter)

People often spend their last days surrounded by a great conspiracy of silence, in which both family and medical staff seek to protect the dying from the harsh reality of death.

2. Others sentimentalize death and find pleasing euphemisms for death.

In the USA death is called a ‘negative patient care outcome’, the funeral parlour is a ‘turnstile to eternity’, while the cremation oven is a ‘slumber chamber’. Believe it or not there was an American radio commercial, sung to the tune ‘Rock of Ages’ which went:

‘Chambers’ caskets are just fine,

Made of sandalwood and pine

If your loved ones have to go

Call Columbus 690.

If your loved ones pass away

Have them pass the Chambers way.

Chambers’ customers all sing

“Death, o death, where is thy sting?”

3. Some, in reaction to all this sentimentality, respond with brutalism.

The American author JD Salinger, who died just a few months ago, had this to say in *The Catcher in the Rye*: *“Boy, when you’re dead, they really fix you up. I hope to hell when I do die somebody has sense enough to just dump me in the river or something. Anything except sticking me in a goddam cemetery. People coming and putting a bunch of flowers on your stomach on Sunday, and all that crap. Who wants flowers when you’re dead? Nobody”*.

4. Yet others try and escape from the dark reality of death by joking about it.

‘Death?’ said Woody Allen. *‘I’m not afraid of dying – I just don’t want to be around when it happens!’* Or the ditty comes to mind:

“Billy, in one of his nice new sashes/Fell in the fire and was burnt to ashes;

Now, although the room grow chilly/I haven’t the heart to poke poor Billy”

5. Yet others pretend death does not matter.

The American Henry Louis Mencken once wrote: *“When I die I shall be content to vanish into nothingness... No show, however good, could conceivably be good forever. I do not believe in immortality, and have no desire for it”*

The Bible by contrast does none of these things.

It doesn’t joke about death – nor does it ignore or belittle death.

Rather it speaks of death as an **enemy**

It is **a destructive enemy**: it tears apart husband and wife, parent and child, friend and lover.

Death, said Martin Luther, is *“the greatest adulterer”* – it breaks the closest of human relationships. It is destructive – and it is painful.

It is a *ruthless enemy*. All too often death cuts down people not when they are past their best, but when they are in their prime. Death is perhaps not so bad when we reach our allotted span of three-score and ten, but sometimes death can be appallingly cruel.

It can strike a little child, a nursing mother, a father with teenage children.

It is a *terrifying enemy*. “**The king of terrors**”, Job described it (Job 18.14).

The psalmist wrote that when the ‘terrors of death’ came upon him, he was “**gripped by fear and trembling**” – “**I am overcome with horror**” (Ps 55.4,5).

The fear of death is what distinguishes humans from animals.

Death, said Shakespeare’s Claudio, “*is a fearful thing: to die and go we know not where To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot. This sensible warm motion to become a kneaded clod*”.

“*He who pretends to face death without fear*”, wrote Rousseau, “*is a liar*”.

Death is not something to be made light of. It is “**the last enemy**”.

But thank God, the Apostle Paul has more to say than that.

2. DEATH IS A DEFEATED ENEMY

Death has lost its potency – for Jesus has risen from the dead.

Listen to the words which precede the Apostle’s description of death’s defeat: “**Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised**” (1 Cor 15.22). Or as Peterson puts it: “*Christ has been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries*”

Jesus has risen from the dead, and in rising has broken death’s icy grip on human kind.

Do notice that the resurrection of Jesus is not just another incredible feat to be entered in the *Guinness Book of Records*, something to be admired but not emulated.

The resurrection of Jesus is “**the guarantee**” of life for all.

Literally Paul says that Jesus is “**the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep**”.

The expression “**the first-fruits**” recalls the first sheaf of the grain harvest that was ceremonially waved in the Temple at the Jewish Feast of Weeks as a token of a greater harvest to come.

This Feast of Weeks coincided with the Passover Festival. It has been suggested that in using this metaphor Paul may have been conscious that Jesus rose from the dead about the same time as the sheaf of the first-fruits was being offered in the temple, the day after the Sabbath following the Passover. I.e. in terms of this metaphor, *the resurrection of Jesus is a sign to all the world of a great harvest of life to come*.

Or to use another metaphor, we can liken the resurrection of Jesus to a breach in a North Sea dyke. Just as, once a hole has been made in the sea defences, the sea comes rushing in, so once a hole has been blown through death’s defences, *life comes flooding into the world wide grave yard*.

Jesus has defeated death, he has defeated the enemy.

For the rest of the chapter Paul elaborates on the wonder of resurrection. Let me read to you some verses of 1 Cor 15 from Peterson's lively paraphrase:

*“Some skeptic is sure to ask. ‘Show me how resurrection works. Give me a diagram; draw me a picture. What does this ‘resurrection body’ look like?’ If you look at this question closely, you realize how absurd it is. There are no diagrams for this kind of thing. We do have a parallel experience in gardening. You plant a ‘dead’ seed; soon there is a flourishing plant. There is no visual likeness between seed and plant. You could never guess what a tomato would look like by looking at a tomato seed. What we plant in the soil and what grows out of it don’t look anything alike. The dead body that we bury in the ground and the resurrection body that comes from it will be dramatically different.... This image of planting a dead seed and raising a live plant is a mere sketch at best, but perhaps it will help in approaching the mystery of the resurrection body – but only if you keep in mind that when we’re raised, we’re raised for **good**, alive forever!”*

Paul concludes: “ **Then the scripture will come true: ‘Death is destroyed; victory is complete!’ ‘Where, Death, is your victory? Where, Death, is your power to hurt?’.... Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”.**

It's a wonderful chapter. For it spells out the good news that Jesus has defeated death!

3. IN JESUS ALONE THERE IS LIFE

What a difference the resurrection of Jesus makes. It enables us to face up to death, with head held high. For death is no longer the end – but the gateway into eternal life.

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

Dietrich Bonhoeffer evinced a similar confidence in life after death, when just before he was martyred for his faith by the Nazis on 8 April 1945 he declared: *“Death is the supreme festival on the road to freedom”.* As he was taken away to be hanged, he said, *“This is the end. For me the beginning of life”*

But – and it is a big BUT - there is nothing automatic about entering into this new life. We do not share in the risen life of Jesus as of right. This life is for those who belong to him. Listen to what Paul says in v22: **“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”.**

I.e. if we are to experience life in the world to come, then in this world we need to identify ourselves with Jesus and become one with him.

We need to recognise that Jesus died and rose for us, and go on to claim the forgiveness and new life that the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus offers.

This is what Christian baptism is all about. For in baptism people don't just get wet.

No, in baptism we identify ourselves with the Jesus who died and rose for us.

As Paul puts it in his letter to the church at Rome: **“By our baptism we were buried with Jesus [lit. “him”] and shared his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might live a new life”**.

This morning Ab, Avril and Vivienne are publicly committing themselves to Jesus – they are proclaiming their solidarity with him.

As they are lowered into the water, they are identifying themselves with the Christ who died and was buried for them; as they are raised up out of the water, they are identifying themselves with the Christ who rose for them. In a dramatic fashion they are declaring: *‘Yes Lord, I believe you died for me; yes Lord, I believe you rose for me – and henceforth I resolve to die to self and to live for you’*.

It is those who are **“in union with Christ”**, who have given themselves over to Jesus for his safekeeping, who will experience the glories of life to come.

Over against the enemy of death, the Christian message is not *‘All will now be well’* – but rather *‘All will now be well for those who share in Christ’s victory by putting their trust in the crucified and risen Lord’*. Or in the words with which George Carey concluded his ‘millennium message’, *“The future has no terrors if we know the person who holds the key to the future”*.

But let me not end with death – or even with life beyond death – but with life this side of death.

According to the *Guinness Book of Records*, Sir Lionel Luckhoo was the world’s *“most successful”* lawyer. Practising mainly in the West Indies, he achieved 245 consecutive murder acquittals. However it was only when he was 64 years of age that he became a Christian.

But what a difference that made. He wrote: *“From that day my life changed – I moved from death to life, from darkness to light. I found real peace and happiness and joy.”*

He went on: *“I am often asked, how do you know Jesus lives. The answer I give is because Jesus is the risen Christ of the empty tomb, and...this is most important, because he lives in my heart”*

Death is a defeated enemy – what a difference Jesus makes to life and to death!

This is our experience – and we want this to be the experience of everyone here this morning.

Don't just be a spectator this Easter Day – discover for yourself the difference that Jesus makes.