

Epiphany 6 2019

It is no surprise to us when people outside the church scoff at the gospel message about Jesus. “Dead people don’t come back to life”, they say. “You’ve let your heart rule your head – you want it to be true that Jesus was resurrected, and so it is. But it’s just wishful thinking.”

What’s very surprising is when leaders of the church publicly teach that the central points of the gospel message are not really true. When they cast doubt on the words of the creed: “On the third day Jesus rose again from the dead.” Or “I believe in the resurrection of the body.”

It’s always put in polite and engaging language – but it’s poison.

It’s often, sadly, spoken by clergy, bishops, even archbishops, but instead of clarifying the message it guts it.

How important is it to firmly acknowledge that on the basis of good historical evidence, our Lord did actually come back from the dead? That he was raised in victory over death?

In our epistle today our apostle, St Paul is confronting this very question. It’s the second of three bites we take out of this stirring 15th chapter of his first letter to the church in the Greek city of Corinth.

“How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?”, he asks.

There were some leaders in the church there who, like their modern counterparts, were undermining the truth about Jesus.

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He takes us back to “What is preached” as he calls the message in verse 12. He has already shown, as we read last week, that all the apostles were united in declaring that Jesus Christ “died for our sins according to the scriptures (the Old Testament); that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to the apostles and to over 500 eye-witnesses.” As well, telling others this message is what he himself and the others have all been working so hard at – read the book of Acts to see just how hard. Why?

And why were many of those first proclaimers, and many since then, prepared to face opposition and death rather than stop proclaiming it or deny that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead?

Verses 13 to 20 give part of the answer. It’s in the form of an ITTT argument, as if the Corinthian believers were there in front of him. It’s an ITTT argument – If This, Then That. And it’s very powerful!

Listen to how it works:

Verse 13: IF there is no resurrection of the dead, THEN not even Christ has been raised.

Verse 14: is two-pronged:

And IF Christ has not been raised,

THEN 1): our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

More than that,

IF Christ has not been raised,

THEN 2): we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not

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raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either.

Verse 17: And IF Christ has not been raised, THEN your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.

AND: IF Christ has not been raised,

Verse 18: Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.

Verse 19: And IF only for this life we have hope in Christ, THEN we are of all people most to be pitied.

Do you get the point? To argue that Jesus Christ did not rise bodily from the dead is not just some philosophical game. It's a matter of life and death. To reject the testimony of the apostles and indeed of Jesus himself about this is to gut Christianity of its truth, love and power; it's hope and promise, and we may all just as well go fishing!

Did you catch what he says?

Knock out the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and what do you have?

Firstly, Telling others about him and calling them to follow him is so much whistling on the wind.

Secondly, Telling others about him is blasphemous in the extreme – misrepresenting God.

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Thirdly, No bodily resurrection means no forgiveness of any sin – for as our sacrifice in our place his death doesn't "work" – God has not declared whether or not Jesus did everything in full to make sinful humans now in the right with God.

And fourthly, all those Christian funerals we've been to are just as pointless as the pagan ones.

Now everyone is at liberty to make up their own mind. For my part, I am driven by the evidence of the eyewitnesses who actually saw, heard and touched Jesus after his death that he was bodily raised from the dead. He did die. He did come back.

If you haven't considered the evidence there in the gospel and the book of Acts, as well as in 1 Corinthians 15, then I urge you to do so with as open a mind as possible. Don't just take my word for it – look at the "source documents" as they are called – the books of the New Testament. We want to be a church where people feel free to challenge and ask questions.

The apostle Paul makes no bones about where he stands – and he was, as he says, the last person you would think would come to be convinced about this. Notice how positively he finishes:

Verse 20:

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

We are not talking here just about an event, a very unusual event, yes a historical event, but about something that changes everything.

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Just like Jesus, those who commit themselves to him for life and eternity, for mercy, forgiveness and hope in the face of the brokenness of this world, will themselves be raised from the dead. They will be part of a whole new harvest of humans with resurrected bodies fit for a world that has been renewed in every way.

The bodily resurrection of Jesus means God has not given up on the human race, or the creation he has made. As we declare in the creed, because of the bodily resurrection of Jesus,

“We believe in the resurrection of the body,

And the life everlasting.” AMEN!