17th Feb 2019

1 Corinthians 15. 1-20

*‘And the award for original resurrection goes to…’* Whether there were such an award or not, the point Paul is trying to make in 1 Corinthians 15 is that an award wouldn’t matter if you didn’t believe in Jesus’ resurrection in the first place!

Last weekend witnessed two awards ceremonies celebrating the arts – the Grammy’s and the Baftas – both of which marked the efforts of those who passionately believe in what they do for a living. The Oscars are coming up of course.

 Letitia Wright, one of the stars of the Marvel film *Black Panther*, [gave an emotional acceptance speech](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-47193611), talking about her times of depression and nearly giving up on acting. Accepting her award for ‘Bafta Rising Star’ she said, ‘The only thing that pulled me out of it was God, my belief, my faith and my family, … I want to encourage you – anyone going through a hard time...God made you and you're important, God loves you. Just let your light shine.’

If these actors didn’t believe so passionately in their art of story-telling through song and screen, their audiences would see right through them! So, says Paul, it is with your belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you don’t have that as part of your core belief, then everything else is pointless.

When the agnostic Swiss playwright and novelist Max Frisch died, he asked that his funeral be conducted in St Peter’s Church in Zurich. But he wanted the service to be stripped of any religious trappings.[[1]](#endnote-1)

A couple of friends would speak. No priest would bless the mourners. No prayers would be offered. No passages from the Bible or the Book of Common Prayer would be read.

One of those in attendance was philosopher Jurgen Habermas. The intentionally jarring contrast of the service’s setting with its content struck him so forcefully that he used it to open his now famous essay *The Awareness of What is Missing*.

And what is missing? Perhaps the question is not “what” but “who”. The late, great Irish writer Dennis O’Driscoll answers the question in his poem [*Missing God.*](https://dennisodriscoll.com/poetry/missing-god/)

Like rebellious children, we thought we would be free once we were free of God. Yet “we confess to missing Him at times.” We miss Him at the wedding conducted in a registrar’s office, as the couple “waits in vain/to be fed a line containing words/like ‘everlasting’ and ‘divine’.”

We miss Him at the crematorium when the famous passage from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*is read aloud, reminding us that all “golden lads and girls” are dust, and to dust must return.

We miss Him in the TV scientist’s cheerful reduction of the cosmos to impersonal mathematical abstractions, leaving Earth to “revolve on its axis/aimlessly, a wheel skidding in snow”.

These are not light matters. But to hear the glibness with which some people announce that God is dead, as the former Bishop Holloway puts it in his memoir *Leaving Alexandria*, a story of his loss of faith, you’d think they were announcing that the number 23 bus has been cancelled.

It’s all very well to say that we are the product of blind, unfeeling chance, dancing to the music of our DNA. But when it comes down to it, is that how we will comfort the dying child, or the bereft mother?

Holloway often quotes a passage from Andre Schwarz-Bart’s great Holocaust novel *The Last of the Just*, where the main character cradles a dead boy on an Auschwitz train. He comforts the other little children with the old story that death itself will die, like a forgotten dream. A woman angrily whispers in his ear: “How can you tell them it’s only a dream?” He replies, between dry sobs: “Madam, there is no room for truth here.”

The former Bishop of Edinburgh is having coffee with a journalist. The journalist is young, just over thirty. He admires the former Bishop. Not five years ago, he would have called himself a Christian and meant it. Now he has left his own Alexandria behind, and the Bishop has helped him make sense of it.

Still, he is a journalist, one of the best. Good journalists ask tough questions. So Douglas Murray asks Richard Holloway right out: “Did you ever think you were preaching lies?”

Holloway is unfazed: “No. I never preached lies. I never pretended to things I wasn’t feeling.” He wasn’t preaching “historical facts.” He was preaching a way of life.

“But is it true?” asks Murray. Is the Christian story true? Here, [he writes later](https://www.spectator.co.uk/2012/03/apostle-of-doubt/),[[2]](#endnote-2) “There is a considered pause.”

It’s true like myths are true, the former Bishop finally says. It’s a sense-making structure. It’s the medium through we which we are best able to talk about “our need for redemption, for challenge, for forgiveness.” In “wonderful ways,” it explains our dual nature, caught as we are between the animals and the angels. So in that sense, yes, it is true.

But as for the Nazarene, tragically crucified? “I don’t think he got out of the tomb.”

There are an ever-growing number of people in our society who think the Christian story is a myth, a nice myth, but it’s not true. We believe in an old man in the sky with a grey beard – it’s a bit like believing in fairies at the bottom of your garden. The claim that jesus lived , died and then somehow came back to life is just a fantasy and a false hope. Because everyone knows that when you are dead you are dead.

For Paul, writing in this letter to the Corinthians, the resurrection is the turning point and the crucial factor in seeing Jesus in a different light. In verse 14 he agrees that without the resurrection your faith is a waste of time. He quotes this creed – ‘I hand on to you the tradition I had received: that Christ died for our sins, was buried and that he was raised to life on the third day’ He then lists all the appearances of the Risen Jesus to various disciples.

Tom Wright, the former Bishop of Durham says that the best explanation by far for the rise of Christianity is that Jesus really did reappear, not as a battered and bleeding survivor, not as a ghost, but as a living, bodily human being. (You can read his detailed investigation into the question of the resurrection, the existence of Jesus and the emergence of Christianity in his magnum opus The Victory of god and the resurrection of the Son of God but it’s difficult to summarise two thousand pages without making general statements.

More succinct is his Simply Christian book. In it he writes, ‘the kind of conclusions, that the rise of Christianity can best be explained by the resurrection of Jesus, is always frustrating from a scientific point of view. Science after all, rightly studies phenomena which can be repeated in laboratory conditions. But history doesn’t. Historians study things that happened once and once only; even if there are partial parallels, each historical event is unique. And the historical argument is quite clear. To repeat: far and away the best explanation for why Christianity began after Jesus’ violent death is that he really was bodily alive again three days later, in a transformed body.[[3]](#endnote-3)

I am not suggesting that this (or any other argument) can force anyone to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. It is always open to anyone to say, ‘Well, I haven’t got a better explanation for the rise of Christianity; but since I know that dead people never rise and never could, there must be some other explanation somewhere.’ That is a perfectly logical position. I would never berate someone for not believing the resurrection. It’s a big ask.

The trouble is, of course, that believing that Jesus was raised from the dead involves, at the very least, suspending judgement on matters normally regarded as fixed and unalterable; or to put it more positively, it requires that we exchange a worldview which says that such things cannot happen for one which, embracing the notion of a creator God making himself known in the story of Israel, and fully and finally in Jesus, recognises that this resurrection makes perfect sense when seen from that point of view.

But faith cannot be forced. That is the way it has always been.

The problem is that if we don’t believe the resurrection we still live as if the resurrection took place – we live with hope, with purpose that life is not meaningless, that the future is positive, that death is not the end – but we are missing the God bit.

Tom Wright then goes on to describe how scientists regularly ask us to believe things which seem illogical and strange and to make sense of the evidence before us. We have to pull our worldviews, our sense of what is after all possible, into a new shape. That, for Tom Wright is the kind of thing demanded by the evidence of the resurrection.

Many may regard putting faith in an unseen God as too much of a gamble. Yet throughout history many followers have bet on God as a sure thing.

Paul wants to be clear that the resurrection is the rock bottom reality for the Christian. It isn’t a strange idea that he has dreamt up himself. He adds himself into the story. Last of all Jesus appeared to him, even though he’s not fit to be called an apostle, because he had persecuted the church.

Paul’s personal contribution reminds us about God’s grace, God’s powerful grace, at work in and through the most unlikely people. From religious persecutors like Paul, to fishermen like Peter.

He wants the Corinthians to remember who they are, the story they are part of. So that other things that trouble them are seen in the correct light. Think for instance how Jesus’ death and resurrection were crucial in the discussion of sexual morality in chapter 6. God ‘bough’ you for himself through Jesus death, and god will rias your body to new life as he raised Jesus; so who you are and what you do in and with your present body matters vitally. Chapter 11 and discussion of communion reminded them that we eat this bread and drink this cup until Jesus comes again. The chapter on love in chapter 13 has the point that love is the thing which will last into the new world that is launched by Jesus’ resurrection.

We could add ourselves to the end of the story, because the story continues, in and through us.

Christianity isn’t a set of ideas, nor a path of spirituality, nor a rule of life, nor a political agenda. It includes and gives energy to all those things. But at its heart it is something very different. It is good news about an event that happened in the world, an event because of which the world can never be the same again. And those who believe it and live by it, will (thank God!) never be the same again either.

*People have often tried to reinvent Christianity as something quite different. Some have supposed that to say ‘The Messiah was raised from the dead’ was simply a fancy first century way of saying ‘God’s cause continues!’ or ‘I still regard Jesus as my leader and teacher.’ That’s all very well if Christianity was simply a set of ethical commands, or if Jesus was simply one guru among many teaching a way to God which one could follow or not as one chose. There are some who want Christianity to be that kind of thing. It is after all, much less demanding on several levels. A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing said Martin Luther.*

*Sometimes the desire that Christianity should be this kind of thing has even been made a reason for denying that Jesus was raised from the dead.’ We can’t say the resurrection happened’ some people have said, ‘because that would make Christianity different from all the other faiths.’*

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*Paul’s careful argument in this section is designed to show the Corinthians, starkly, what would follow if you were to declare that there is no resurrection. Since this is what virtually all the pagans believed, the best explanation for why some in Corinth were denying the resurrection is that it made no sense within their surrounding world view. There was no room for it in the culture they had grown up in. We could say the same today. But Paul wants them to see that the Christian world view is different, and it has the power at a personal level and the rigour at an intellectual level to take on the old pagan world-views and win. The resurrection is the foundation of the Christian counter culture. And the immediate results go beyond culture into the world of royal claims: Jesus is Lord, so Caesar isn’t.*

*This takes us, too, into the deeper world of moral and spiritual reality, and by that route into the very structure of the cosmos itself. Paul’s strongest argument in this passage is to point up the link between sin and death (verse 17). If Jesus has been raised, the power of death has been broken, and final victory over it is assured (verse 26). Death, as always in biblical thought, is the result of sin, as humans turn away from the life giving God and vainly attempt to find life elsewhere. So if death has been defeated it must mean that sin has been defeated as well. This should affect our attitude to life.*

Richard Dawkins, the atheistic scientist, in his book The God Delusion, criticizes Christians for not being sincere and really believing that the resurrection is true. ‘Shouldn’t they all behave like the Abbot of Ampleforth’ he writes. ‘When Cardinal Basil Hume told him he was dying, the Abbot was delighted for him. ‘Congratulations. That’s brilliant news. I wish I was coming with you’. The abbot it seems was a sincere believer. Why don’t all Christians say something like this?’ Dawkins has an interesting and challenging criticism of people of faith.

With Jesus’ resurrection, Paul insists a new world has opened up, in which the all-embracing power of sin and death no-longer holds sway. The world as we know – the world, whose loveliness, majesty, fragrance and teeming life are mocked by death, decay, corruption and sheer chaos, has heard the news that there is a way forward, a way into a life yet greater, more beautiful, and more powerful, than this one. Take away Jesus’ resurrection and all that is put into doubt.

And, as Paul says, without the hope of resurrection, what is the point of being one of the Messiah’s people in the first place? Hated, reviled, persecuted, struggling – if this is all there is, surely it would be better to throw in the towel, to admit that many other philosophies give you an easier life, and to stop wasting your time with this Jesus nonsense? You are declaring that no great thing has yet happened through which the world has been changed. He will develop this later in the chapter, but already the point is coming through loud and clear.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the great campaigner against apartheid in South Africa, had held onto hope that things would change in his country because of two things. One was the example of a white priest Trevor Huddleston, who I had the privilege of meeting many years ago. Tutu held onto the memory of how Huddleston would take off his hat to Tutu’s mother, make way on the pavement for her and greet her warmly. It was unheard of at that time in the culture of South Africa for a white man to do this for a black woman. But Tutu saw in the actions of this white Christian man a different culture at work, and a different king being served.

Secondly, he was convinced that because of the resurrection, victory would come one day and God’s purposes of justice and peace would be realized. When Jesus preached blessed are the poor, blessed are you who are hungry, blessed are you who weep, blessed are you who are hated and insulted because of the Son of man, his words would be vindicated – because of the resurrection. Tutu believed nothing could stop that struggle. When people rang him up with death threats he would laugh down the phone to them. ‘Even if you kill me he would say – we have the victory. You cannot stop God.’

But Paul doesn’t therefore conclude that we should look to the wonderful hope to come and do nothing. He doesn’t. He returns at the end of this chapter to the present significance of what we are and do. More of that next week.

How God will take our prayer, our art, our love, our writing, our political action, our music, our honesty, our daily work, our pastoral care, our teaching, our whole selves – how God will take this and weave its varied strands into the glorious tapestry of his new creation, we can at present have no idea. That he will do so is part of the truth of the resurrection, and perhaps one of the most comforting parts of all.

Thanks be to God for he gives us the victory.

1. Esther O Reilly <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/What-s-stopping-Jordan-Peterson-from-rejecting-Jesus-resurrection> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2012/03/apostle-of-doubt/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Tom Wright, Simply Christian, SPCK, 2006, p99-102 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)