

Pro-Cathedral / Donnybrook

5/6 February 2022

Welcome

A very dear friend of mine, a woman of deep faith, lost her husband some years ago. In the initial bereavement, she asked me intently and intensely where her husband is now. The question came from the heart. From a strictly faith point of view, it could be enough to say our beloved dead are with the Lord. I myself would not be unhappy with that. But of course from a perfectly normal human point of view, it would help if we could imagine or picture what lies ahead. A little less of the unknown would help.

Topic

This is exactly the challenge in front of St Paul as he wrote chapter 15 in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Steps

What was going on in Corinth? It was a recently found Christian community in the large and beautiful city of Corinth, on the gulf of Corinth in Greece. The community was full of energy, gifts, tensions and problems. In other words, alive and normal! Paul addresses many of the problems in his first letter to them. Specifically on the resurrection, it seems that some people in the community really did believe Jesus was risen from the dead but simply couldn't go on to believe that the dead will rise in Christ. The problem was partly one of imagination: they took their corpses seriously – and they just couldn't see or imagine how a dead body could come back to life. You can see their point – death does involve a destruction and a kind of defeat.

How did Paul go about helping them? In the course of 1 Cor 15, he takes three steps. The first step in our reading today: the founding experience of those who first encountered the risen Christ. He was reminding them, as he says, of their faith in Christ risen. This was the faith they received and in which they stand. He even quotes an early creed, which ran something like this:

Christ died for our sins,
in accordance with the scriptures;
that he was buried;
and that he was raised to life on the third day,
in accordance with the scriptures;
that he appeared first to Cephas and secondly to the Twelve.

They actually already believe that so he is just reminding them, as a foundation for what he is going to say in the next two steps.

Next, Paul treats them to a severe logic. Are you sure you want to say there is no resurrection at all? In that case, even Jesus is not risen, your faith is a waste of time and

my ministry is a delusion. Quite strong logic. It comes up in a shortened form next Sunday.

In the third step, Paul tries to open up their imagination. Body doesn't have to be just one thing – there are different kinds of flesh, different kinds of bodies, earthly bodies and heavenly bodies. And then he makes a bit jump: there will be a spiritual body. An oak tree comes from an acorn – a huge transformation within obvious continuity. This loosening up of the meaning of body comes, again in a short form, on the Sunday afterwards.

Conclusion

So, where does all that leave us today? We also can't imagine how our beloved dead are in the Lord – we are like some in Corinth. Does it matter that our imagination is limited? Yes and no. Yes, it would help if we could imagine life after death – after all, we are only human. On the other hand, no, it doesn't matter. Of course, we cannot really imagine something of which we have no experience. A Church of Ireland priest put it well once in a homily: Just as the child in the womb cannot imagine life outside the womb, likewise we cannot picture "what God has in store for those who love him." And still, the next stage of life is real.

For the next two Sundays, we have a chance to reflect on these mysterious things. Perhaps I could suggest that you take out chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians and read the full text story, slowly and carefully for yourself. If you like music, you will recognise many passages because they were set to music by Handel in *The Messiah*.