

## **1 Corinthians 15: 1-11**

### **Intro**

I wonder if you heard about the school teacher who was having trouble keeping the attention of his students? He was quite young, newly qualified and the students were quite big and scary, and eventually as he was writing on the board one lesson, he thought he'd have to do something about it and he got his piece of chalk and he decided to throw it at the guy who he thought was making the most noise. And he spun round and threw the piece of chalk and he missed by about a metre. But there was a fly buzzing around in the window, and the piece of chalk hit the fly right in the back and spattered it all over the window.

And with great presence of mind he said 'And next time that'll be you son'. And he never had any more trouble.

(So there's a warning to anyone who's thinking of dropping off in this sermon. )

Well there's an albeit not entirely serious threat of death, but our Bible passage this morning was written to deal with an altogether very serious threat of death – the reality that one day, sooner or later, you and I will die. And 1 Corinthians 15 is especially good news because it's about that greatest of problems – the problem of death, and how Jesus conquered it.

Brian Johnston, the cricket commentator on Radio 4 said in his autobiography shortly before he died: "I find the after life an impossible place to imagine or believe in, though I persuade myself that there must be some light at the end of the tunnel. But I do not find it easy to conceive what it might be."

Well 1 Corinthians 15 as whole takes us down to the end of the tunnel to show us that there is light, and it gives us a glimpse of what life at the end of the tunnel, life after death will be like. Paul is going to tackle certain key issues about life after death, but first of all he starts with the basics, he starts with what they already know: verse 1

**<sup>1</sup> Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you**

Because if we want to think about death and life after death, the place to start is with the gospel...that is with the only man so far who has ever died and come through the experience alive, never to die again. The gospel claims that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

And I've got three points this morning:

The nature of that resurrection

The evidence for the resurrection

And the significance of the resurrection.

So first of all:

### **1. The Nature of the resurrection**

We just need to get clear exactly what Paul means when he's talking about Jesus resurrection. What kind of claim is Paul making? What kind of resurrection did Jesus have? And the answer is – a physical one. You see the issue in Corinth and for some people today isn't over the idea of a resurrection – but the issue is what kind of

resurrection? An article in the Sunday Times a while ago about the late Freddie Mercury, lead singer of Queen - ended with these words:

- ⌚ So Freddie is not dead. He may not have been spotted in as many supermarkets as Elvis, but his fans are just as reluctant to let him go. Pop stars are immortal because they provide the sound track for other peoples' lives.

Now many famous figures in history live on in that sense – but the claim of the apostle Paul just here is something different isn't it? Jesus resurrection was more than an idea – he doesn't just live on in the minds of his followers.

- ⌚ Paul's claiming that he rose from the dead physically
- ⌚ He's claiming that Jesus is alive today physically.

Just take a look at verses 3 and 4 because that's the assumption behind them: Paul writes <sup>3</sup> **For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,** <sup>4</sup> **that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day**

Do you see the question is what does Paul mean in v4 when he says 'he was raised'? Does it mean Christ rose in some kind of spiritual sense? Or does it mean he lives in our hearts and memories? Well the rest of the verse tells us. Because what was it that was raised in verse 4?

Well it was the same thing that died in verse 3 and then that was buried in v4.

- ⌚ What was it that died? Well he says, v3, Christ – his body on a cross.
- ⌚ And what was it that was buried? Well, v4, he – Christ, his body in a tomb
- ⌚ And therefore was it that was raised – well clearly Christ – his body – to life
  - The physical body that died
  - The physical body that was buried
  - That physical body was raised.

So that is the nature of the resurrection: it is a claim that Jesus Christ physically from death. Which is a striking claim.

### **For one thing, it is unique.**

It is unique in all of the world's major religions. For example if you take the prophet Mohammad, on June 8<sup>th</sup> in the year 632 AD at the age of 61 he died – and his tomb has become a place of pilgrimage and is still visited by millions of devout Muslims from all around the world.

If you take the great religious figure the Buddha and look at the earliest accounts of his death they stress, quote – 'it was with that total passing away in which nothing whatever remains behind.' So on neither of those great personalities on who great world religions have been founded has there ever been the slightest hint of a claim to resurrection.

In fact I read in an Encyclopaedia this week it said: *Although a belief in the immortality of the human soul or in the resurrection of certain divine beings was part of some ancient religions, the belief in human resurrection was virtually unknown.*

And so the Christian claim is unique: it's founder – a flesh and blood man, died, was buried and then rose.

### **Which, for another thing, is extraordinary.**

It goes without saying really doesn't it? Paul wrote this letter in about 55AD – 25 years after Jesus died. He's saying that just 25 years ago a man rose from the dead –

it's extraordinary. And I guess that if we've been Christians for a long time we could kind of forget that. But the idea that a human being could die and be buried and then rise to life beyond the grave is just amazing. Unless you're easily taken in it is not an easy thing to come to terms with. Unless you're very gullible it is not a very easy thing to believe. It doesn't happen very often – well only once actually so far. Which is why Paul moves on now. Because he wants to remind these Christians in Corinth that although it is a very extraordinary claim, there are nevertheless very good reasons for being sure it's the truth.

So first - the nature of the resurrection, it's physical.

***But then second we need - the evidence for the resurrection – it's factual.***

Well now as we've just seen in verses 3 and 4 Paul mentions three key events: Christ's death, Christ's burial and Christ's resurrection. And really no one seriously doubts the first two. Even back then in Paul's day no one disputed Jesus' death or his burial. In fact no one even disputed the fact that come Sunday morning the tomb was empty. That the body had gone was a given – even to Jesus enemies. The issue was – what had happened to it?

- ⌚ Jesus enemies claimed it had been stolen.
- ⌚ Whereas Jesus followers, not at first, but eventually, came to the conclusion that it had been resurrected.

So what was it that changed their minds? Well, says Paul, they literally came face to face with the evidence – in other words the risen, physical, living Jesus Christ.

Let's read verses 5-8: **he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.** <sup>6</sup> **After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.** <sup>7</sup> **Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles,** <sup>8</sup> **and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.**

Now do you see what that means:

**First of all it means that the resurrection is a public claim.**

That is to say Paul is not dealing in the realm of private revelation. This isn't a Mohammed or a Book of Mormon thing. There was no one else there when apparently the Angel Gabriel revealed the Koran to Mohammed or when the Book of Mormon was revealed to Joseph Smith. No-one was there for verification. But Paul says umpteen people saw Jesus. In fact there in v6 500 people saw him at the same time. Which really rules out the idea that this resurrection thing was a hallucination – it's highly unlikely that 500 people would see the same hallucination simultaneously. So it's a public multi-witness claim.

**And second do you see that the resurrection is a living memory claim.**

As I say Paul's writing 25 years after the event. And these witnesses he speaks about are mostly still alive. He even says so in v6: **After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.** Implication: go and ask them. The eye witnesses are still around they're still there. Now of course they aren't for us – but the very fact that someone could so confidently appeal to the existence of a multitude of living eye

witnesses suggests he's either taking a very great risk, or he's confident that he's telling the truth. It's a living memory claim.

**And then third it's a life changing claim.**

- ⌚ So in v5 Paul mentions Peter and the twelve. And do you remember just how dejected they all were at Jesus arrest and trial. The last thing they expected was a resurrection – in fact they were all so afraid that to a man they abandoned and denied him. *But something happened to them which transformed their outlook – Paul says they came face to face with the risen Jesus Christ.*
- ⌚ And then in v7 Peter mentions James. He was related to Jesus, Jesus was his half-brother. In fact James became the leader of the Jerusalem church (?), But the Gospels tell us that before Christ's crucifixion James thought Jesus was bonkers, out of mind to claim the things he claimed and say the things he said. *But something happened to James which transformed his outlook – Paul says he came face to face with the risen Jesus Christ.*
- ⌚ And then **last of all**, Paul says, **he appeared to me also...** That is Paul the Pharisee, Paul the persecutor, Paul whose mission in life it was to wipe out the church, to put an end to these ridiculous Christian claims. *But something happened to Paul which transformed his outlook – he says he came face to face with the risen Jesus Christ.*

Now we've of course we've only glanced at the evidence mentioned in this letter, it'd be great to look at the Gospels and the other New Testament documents – but when you put all together it all point in one direction: the resurrection is belongs in the realm of reality. A lawyer called Sir Edward Clarke put it like this:

*As a lawyer I have made a prolonged study of the evidences for the events of the first Easter Day. To me the evidence is conclusive, and over and over again in the High Court I have secured the verdict on evidence not nearly so compelling.*

So do you see Paul wants us to know that the idea of the resurrection of Christ is not

- ⌚ a fairy story
- ⌚ it's not a fiction
- ⌚ it's a fact

And it belongs in the realm of facts, it belongs in the real world. The world of...cars, and pavements, and accidents, and civic services, and war in Iraq and having to get up in the morning, of disease and illness, and going to school and work. That's the world we live in and Paul says that's the world the resurrection happened in. It's part of our world, the real world, real life, it really happened.

In other words Paul would say that if the resurrection doesn't figure in our understanding of life and the world, then actually we're living out of step with reality.

Now it may well be that you're here this morning and not at all convinced that that is the case, that the evidence for the resurrection is persuasive.

So can I recommend to you this little booklet – it goes over the evidence for Christ's resurrection very clearly, it's a very helpful read and maybe you'd like to take one from me after the service.

So the nature of the resurrection – physical  
 And the evidence for the resurrection – factual.  
 And then third...

***The significance of the resurrection.***

Because we might well ask, so what? Why does it matter?

What is the significance of it all? Well Paul's answer would be that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is fundamental. You can see that all the way through this passage.

**It was fundamental to Paul's message.**

V3 - <sup>3</sup> For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day

So Paul considered the resurrection to part of the basic Christian message, which is why, verse 1 he says it was **the gospel I preached to you**

But the problem is that for various reasons, which we'll look at next week, the church in Corinth had gone off Paul. Actually I remember once listening to the Provost of Newcastle Cathedral preaching and he started his sermon by saying – 'those of you who know me will know I'm not a great fan of the apostle Paul or of his writings'. But that kind of attitude just won't do. Because Paul is an apostle of Christ – that's his point in verses 8, 9 and 10 he says **and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.** <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them -- yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

Do you see his saying – sure you might not think I'm very impressive - actually I agree with you. But that doesn't alter the fact that by God's grace I am an apostle. And the resurrection is fundamental to my message.

But in any case whatever anyone might think of Paul, he is only saying what the other apostles said.

**Because the resurrection was fundamental to their message too.**

V3: <sup>3</sup> For what I *received* I passed on to you... And then down in verse 11 he sums up by saying <sup>11</sup> **Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.**

But then the resurrection isn't just fundamental to the message of the apostles...

**It's fundamental to the message of the whole Bible.**

Did you notice those phrases in verses 3 and 4 <sup>3</sup> For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day *according to the Scriptures*. In other words the Old Testament said it would happen, and it did.

The point is this. You can't have real Christianity without Christ's resurrection.

- ⌚ It's a fundamental of Paul's message. Why?
- ⌚ Because it's a fundamental of all the apostle's message. Why?
- ⌚ Well because in fact it's a fundamental fulfillment of the entire scriptures.

You can't have real Christianity without the resurrection of Christ.

So let me direct our attention back to v1: <sup>1</sup> **Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.** And if we're Christian here this morning then we'll have believed this message too. But look at verse 2 <sup>2</sup> **By this gospel – that is the gospel of the resurrection - By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.**

That phrase, believed in vain - it's the opposite of holding fast – it means you're drifting off. You started to believe it but now you're drifting away, it no longer has an impact in your life. And I guess there are 1000s and 1000s of people in this country who would believe in the resurrection like that. There are probably thousands of people who said the creed on Easter Sunday – I believe in the resurrection of the dead – but it makes no difference really to their lives. They believe it in principle – but it's empty, it's in vain. Because they are not firmly holding to it in their lives.

So I hope we'll see over the next few weeks why the resurrection is much more than solid proof for the truth of Christianity. It is that. But it's more than that – it's actually fundamental for living the Christian life.

Do you remember that quote from Brian Johnstone:

- ⌚ I find the after life an impossible place to imagine or believe in, though I persuade myself that there must be some light at the end of the tunnel. But I do not find it easy to conceive what it might be.

Well can I say that Christ's resurrection answers those kinds of thoughts and longings. It is a glimpse beyond the grave. It gives wonderful confidence in the face of death. In fact I wonder if you noticed it – there's a lovely word Paul uses there in v6 – just listen **After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have...**he doesn't say died - he says some have...**fallen asleep.** Because for the Christian death is no more permanent or dangerous than nodding off. Christ's resurrection shows and assures us that there is life after death.

**By this gospel you are saved,** says Paul, **if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.**