

THE PRIMACY OF THE RESURRECTION

Epiphany 5 Year C

Isa. 6:1-8 (9-13); Ps. 138; 1 Cor. 15:1-11; Luke. 5:1-11

Gladstone 06/02/2022

John Henry Newman, a major figure in the Oxford movement in England in the late 1800s, once said: “To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.”

During our Christian life we have the potential to undergo many changes. Hopefully these changes are, for the most part, beneficial for us—that is, they work to our advantage—to our betterment. In our obedience to the gospel we pray that we will be changed—ever so gradually it seems sometimes—into the likeness of Christ.

Occasionally, however, the changes we undergo are not for the better. Sometimes, perhaps even often, we can become complacent, letting slide some of those things that characterised our early understanding of the gospel. If we’re not challenged enough in our faith, or we allow ourselves to be influenced by people who dispute some of the tenets of our faith, we are likely, in time, to question some of those things in which we used to believe quite passionately. If we forget our spiritual origins, we can be easily led astray into vain speculation.

Throughout the history of the church, scholars and Christian mystics of all types have discussed, argued and even done all sorts of horrible things, in order to put forward various ideas and doctrines. It’s a miracle in itself that the truth of the gospel has even managed to survive the last two thousand years. Perhaps one of the most contentious issues that have arisen among Christians, non-Christians and other religious groups is the subject of what happens after you die. Is there some kind of resurrection or is there not? If there is, what form does it take? Should we understand it in the traditional Christian sense, or in some Eastern mystical sense? I suppose we can also ask: *Does it really matter?*

It was just such a discussion that was going on in the Corinthian church at the time Paul wrote, and it was causing no small problem. Among their apparent many other concerns, this too was causing dissension. Some were arguing that the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead was a lie and that there would be no bodily resurrection of those who had died before the return of Christ. It’s this question that Paul addresses in chapter 15 of his first letter to the Corinthians. For Paul, this is no minor issue. It is not, for Paul, one of those things for which there should be a tolerance of opinions. For Paul, the question of the resurrection of the dead has enormous consequences for our Christian faith. It leads us, in fact, to one of the pivotal doctrines upon which the church stands—the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This whole passage, while dealing specifically about human resurrection is much broader. It's about holding on to the truth by which you have first believed. Amid the hustle and bustle of life and even our work for the church, it is possible to forget where we have come from—to lose track of the foundations of our faith—something that we ought never to do. Here, Paul addresses the church at Corinth on a subject that was so basic to their Christian faith that they ought never to have forgotten what they had already been taught.

For each of us, in fact, the substance of the gospel ought to be familiar but we can never be certain that this will always be the case. There *are* those who believe for a time and then fall away—either through complacency or straight out disbelief. And so every now and again, we need to be reminded of the basis of our faith. Periodically, we need to go back over, not only *what* we believe but also the reasons *why* we believe it. In this case, the concern was the death and resurrection of Christ, a subject that for Paul, is the heart and soul of the gospel. Paul did not originate the tradition, he was merely a link in the chain—a very important link for the Corinthian church—for it was through *him* that they came to knowledge of the gospel.

Paul states that if they do not hold fast to the gospel that he has already taught them, their belief is in vain. The implication is this: If there is no resurrection for believers, then Christ did not rise. If Christ did not rise, then they did indeed believe in vain. If they are right and there is no resurrection, then everything else is a lie, and they cease to exist as believers altogether. There is a kind of domino effect that transpires. One thing leads to the next. This applies, not only to resurrection but also to all the tenets of the faith that have been passed down to us. Here is a passage that points to the importance of our statements of faith that regularly remind us of the centre of our faith.

What, then, was the content of their knowledge of the resurrection that Paul had taught them? Well, Paul sums it up in three short statements. These are the “bare bones” if you like of the gospel of our salvation: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; he was buried; and he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

Christ died in order to deal with sin. How he dealt with sin Paul does not say. He is simply content to affirm that it was so. The fact that Christ died in accordance with the Scriptures is important, for it means that it didn't happen by chance but was willed and determined by God himself—according to *his* purpose. The salvation of humanity was

not devised by human wisdom but is found in the crucified Messiah—foolishness to humankind but wisdom to God.

Paul then mentions the burial of Christ because it was the necessary stage between death and resurrection. The burial of Jesus confirms the reality of both his death and his resurrection. If he was buried he really must have been dead—if he was buried, the resurrection must have been the revival of a corpse.

And so, with Paul's mention of Jesus' resurrection, he comes to the heart of the matter. Just as Jesus was truly dead and buried, so he was truly raised from the dead—bodily—and seen by a large number of witnesses on a number of occasions. Belief in the resurrection of the dead begins with the reality of the resurrection of Christ. It is the foundation of our existence in Christ.

In short: Christ died, but he is not dead; he was buried, but he is not in the grave; he was raised, and he is alive now. For Paul the resurrection was an essential part of his preaching. It consisted of factual statements about the *end* of Jesus' life not his earthly ministry. For Paul, the important facts were that he died, he was buried, and he was raised.

However, not only does Paul speak of those who witnessed the resurrected Jesus before his ascension, he also speaks of his own experience on the road to Damascus, when he too was confronted by the resurrected Christ.

Like Isaiah before him, Paul experienced a sense of great unworthiness before God. It amazed him that one who had so viciously persecuted the church, could not only be forgiven but could also be chosen as a special messenger of the gospel. He is overwhelmed by the grace of God and emphasizes that his authority to preach the gospel comes from God alone and through no personal ambition.

The fact that Paul persecuted Christians brings out more clearly what is true of all of us—our total dependence on the grace of God. Paul points out that the grace that God showed him was not in vain. It was not without effect. So, Paul encourages the Corinthians to believe what was preached to them regarding the resurrection. It was no lie—Paul himself is the proof. The evidence for the resurrection is there if you choose to believe it.

And so it is that we too need to hold on to that which has brought us to a knowledge of Christ. Our own lives ought to give testimony to the gospel—give testimony to the grace of God, through which we were brought into his kingdom. We might not have a problem with believing that there will be a resurrection of all believers but there will be other areas in which we perhaps need to go back to basics and re-learn, so that our belief will not have been in vain.

For instance: If your faith in God is grounded in the knowledge that God is love and then display a lack of love in your Christian walk, then you have believed in vain. If your Christian commitment is founded on the fact that God accepts you as you are and then you criticize others, then you have believed in vain. There are many ways, even today, where we can lose sight of the essential truths of our faith and so cause our belief to be of no value to us.

It's unfortunate that in the church today, many who claim to be believers deny what for Paul was the same as denying the faith itself. To deny the truth of the gospel that has been passed on to us—to deny the truth by which we have believed—means to believe in vain. In this passage, Paul points us back to the foundations of our faith—a faith that comes to us primarily through the Scriptures but also through the witness of the apostles and through the tradition of the church.

We remember the foundations of our faith through attending Bible study, through reciting the creeds of the church and other statements of faith and through participating in the worship and sacraments of the church. These things help us to focus on the foundations of our faith. They remind us from where we have come and point us in the direction we should go. Either you believe these witnesses of the faith or you do not.

Our calling, brothers and sisters in Christ, is to proclaim the gospel as people who are totally convinced of its reality and significance. To proclaim the resurrection of Christ is to proclaim the gospel itself—the good news that God loves sinners and has made provision through Christ's death and resurrection to overcome our alienation from God and from each other—so that we may know God's forgiveness and have a sure hope for the future.

To God be all the glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.