

Sermons at the All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Geoff Read on Sunday 16th February 2025

Bible passage: I Corinthians 15:12-20



My father died very suddenly. He had a massive heart attack while seated in his car. It was in the week after Easter

I never saw his body, we were living away in Switzerland, my aging parents in UK. The next I knew I was standing next to a sealed coffin in the church

And I remember the Sunday after, we were still singing Easter hymns – “Jesus Christ is risen today, our triumphant holy day ...”

And I remember asking myself with a fresh and now very personal urgency: is this true?

Last Sunday, as a church family, we talked about Philippa. Just two Sundays before she had been here worshipping with us. The following Friday she suffered a seventh stroke and the Friday after that she died peacefully.

Alison and I took her funeral on Monday. But none here will see evidence of her death, just an empty pew

When I take a funeral service, though, I want you to know that I stand by the head of the coffin and lay my hand on the wooden lid to pray, commending the person to God’s loving care and the body for burial or cremation

Touching in that way, I think is important

It’s a very physical gesture in what is a very physical moment

Marking the end of living physical life in one way and the start of living that same life in a new way, a physical way in a new dimension of reality

What for us is still past, present, future is for that person an eternal Now into which they have stepped

Its also a gesture about relationship – just like we shake hands, hug, air kiss, as a gesture of friendship, trust

This is marking the ongoing thread of relationship with that person, especially when I have actually known that person like I do Philippa

Physicality and relationship are at the heart of our reading from I Corinthians 15 in which Paul continues his teaching on the resurrection of Jesus

“How can some say there is no resurrection?” he asks

No rhetorical, lecture hall philosophical question

No, it's a pastoral one being asked by some in the church in Corinth

Maybe shaped by their Greek background in which the soul was all important. Death set that eternal soul free, leaving the troublesome body behind - prone to aging, temptation, decay

Or maybe the question was shaped by their Jewish background, for it was a very diverse church – the Sadducees tradition denied any ongoing life after death

Or maybe the question arose simply from the common sense of our 24/7 life experience, that dead people stay just that: dead

And that, in a CI culture in which death was a very present part of life, unlike ours where we delegate it to health professionals and funeral directors

Paul's response isn't just a pastoral one – comfort for grieving family and friends, important as that is

It's a deeply existential one – its about the lynch pin that is at the heart of our faith

As he says in v20 – “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died ...”

Note the language – “has been raised ...”

God the Son, raised by God the Father, through the power of God the Spirit – see v15

Read on in chapter 15 and you will find Paul exploring what this means – the continuity and discontinuity of resurrection.

Like a seed that dies and splits open in the earth to then grow into a plant, so the physical body suited for the new dimension of reality we call heaven is the same but different from the one suited to this life in time and space

Plant from seed – the same but different

Think of the resurrection appearances of Jesus – same but different

And what is true of us is also true of the whole created order – what is now will one day be transformed, resurrected into something even more wonderful

“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins ...” (v17)

The Cross and resurrection are a single whole – the resurrection is not the reversal of a tragedy, but the proclamation of a victory

Death, the great and final outcome of sin is shown to be defeated through the death of Jesus

There on the cross he absorbs our guilt and shame, the power and penalty of sin and overwhelms it with the power of love and truth and life

And in being raised, He proves it

And why should God, the original author of life itself not be able to give life to Jesus and to us in this way too?

Paul, when speaking on one of his missionary journeys as recorded in the book of Acts (26:8) asks exactly that: "Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?"

What do you think about the resurrection?

Or better, what do you believe about the resurrection?

"Believe", because its not something we can prove, its something we have to trust about?

And "believe", because its not just something we think about but about how we live life and, one day, face death

At the start I talked about two issues Paul points to in this passage. I have already touched on the first, the physicality of the resurrection

I want to end with the other, the relational, that gesture of the hand on the coffin

In I Cor 15:12 and 14 Paul uses the word "proclaimed"

It's a word that means something passed on that is rooted in personal experience

Research strongly suggest that Paul was writing this letter in about 50 AD, within 20 years of the death and raising of Jesus

We know from the book of Acts that Paul went to Jerusalem, met the original followers of Jesus like Peter and James who were the first witnesses to what we now call the resurrection (Acts 9:26ff)

So he is passing on something he had been told about

But more than that, Paul himself had met the risen Jesus on the Road to Damascus

Jesus had revealed himself to Paul in ways that met him where he was at and invited him on

Christians believe that this same risen Jesus is able to reach out to us too in ways uniquely appropriate to you and to me to reveal himself, and to invite us into a living relationship

He is no dead hero from the past, but a living Lord, able and willing to set us free from the power and penalty of sin and, one day, also from the finality of death