

Easter Year C 2016 Resurrection Sermon 1

In the season of Easter this year I am going to prepare a series of three sermons that draw from what St Paul has to say about the resurrection in his first letter to the Corinthians. Some in the Corinthian congregation had found what Paul had proclaimed to them about a bodily resurrection to be utterly objectionable. They probably regarded what he had said to be superstitious foolishness. In holding this opinion they would be in sympathy with quite a few Christians in the twenty first century who hold same view about the resurrection. Because this is the case it is important for us to hear how Paul defended the faith of the church that believed in the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

I begin this series of sermons by informing you that the hope of a general resurrection of people who had died was part of the hope of Israel. This hope, as we heard it expressed in the reading from Daniel, was an integral part of a hope for a transformed creation in which God's reign over all things will be known. The hope for resurrection was a hope that the *matter* of human beings and the universe will be transformed in such a way that there be will a continuity and discontinuity between the old and the new. The hope for transformation also included a hope that God's purpose for his human creation would be fulfilled in such a way that we could truly affirm the goodness of all creation because of God's involvement with it throughout history. An aspect of the resurrection hope from the Hebrew Scriptures involves the vindication of God's purpose for human beings whose lives are bodily lives. The theologian Jürgen Moltmann writes:

...I would think that eternal life gives the broken and the impaired and those whose lives have been destroyed space and time and strength to live the life which they were intended for, and for which they were born...I think it for the sake of the justice which I believe is God's concern..."¹

My point in briefly touching on the resurrection hope in the Hebrew Scriptures is to show that resurrection means that God does not abandon his creation as if he has

¹ J. Moltmann. *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM, 1996) 118.

changed his mind that it was good, but rather he heals and transforms it. In later sermons I will take up in more detail some of the themes that I have just touched on here. I will finish sermon by making two points in some detail.

The first of these points is that according to Paul the resurrection constitutes is the good news that is at the core of Christianity. Put more bluntly Paul holds that if there is no resurrection there cannot be a church because there is no good news for human beings about their future and the future of the world. He concedes that it is possible to imagine that people might gather to think about the dead Jesus but he states that if they did meet for this purpose it would not be a Christian meeting. So Paul's point is that without the foundational truth of the bodily resurrection of Jesus there can be no church because there is no good news of God's dawning new order.

Paul emphasizes the centrality of the resurrection by telling the Corinthians of the testimony he had received when he was converted and became a Christian. What he received was contained in a very early Christian confession that declared that Jesus was raised from the dead. This confession, scholars suggest, was probably formulated about three years after Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem. Paul's point in quoting from this ancient confession of faith is that the resurrection of the dead Jesus is not hysterical speculation by some of his friends and followers who were driven mad by their loss, as is sometimes claimed. His point, rather, is to re-emphasize that the resurrection is of the first importance.

The second point to be made is that Paul thinks of the resurrection as an event in history. Now we need, I think, to be very careful with this word 'historical'. If by 'historical' we mean that if a camera crew were filming around Jerusalem they would have caught on film Jesus after his death then the resurrection is not 'historical'. By contrast the New Testament, including Paul, says that Jesus 'appeared' to Peter, the twelve, and to five hundred brothers and sisters. These people were prepared to bear witness that Jesus 'appeared' to them. Use of the word 'appeared' means that any encounter with the risen Jesus is at his discretion; neither Peter nor the others could conjure up the presence of the risen Jesus. Yet less than three years after the crucifixion there are many people who are prepared to testify that Jesus has appeared to them. The point that Paul is making is that the resurrection of Jesus was not event

outside history. It was an event in space and time, but it was an event the manifestation of which was controlled by God.

In finishing I can recap the three points I have made in this first of a series of sermons. First the resurrection of the dead was an expectation of some streams of Jewish religion. For Paul, as we shall see in coming weeks, this meant that Jesus' resurrection was the forerunner of the general resurrection. Second there is no good news and, therefore, no church without the resurrection. And lastly the resurrection is an event in space and time. In two weeks I will discuss what Paul says to the Corinthians who could not believe in the resurrection of the dead.