

SERMON – 12/5/24

'The Natural and the Spiritual'

1 Corinthians 15:35-58

"If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body."
(1 Cor.15:44b)

We come this morning to the closing section of the chapter from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians that we have been reflecting on since Easter. We have been pondering the Christian message about the resurrection of the dead that we perhaps don't think often enough about. At a time when as a congregation we are mourning the deaths of three people who have been active in the life of our fellowship it is particularly important that we take heed to the apostle's desire expressed in 1 Thessalonians that we encourage one another in the face of our mortality.

So far in the chapter we have celebrated the basis of our Easter faith in the message about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead; we have considered what it would mean to us if there were no resurrection and our faith was in vain; and we have contrasted what it is to be 'in Christ' rather than simply 'in Adam.'

In this final section of the chapter Paul explores that contrast between Adam and Christ in greater detail and uses a number of images to help us get our heads around something that the purely rational mind tells us is ridiculous - what rising from the dead might actually be like.

There is a strange mixture of responses to questions about life after death. On the one hand a lot of people would never dream about discussing death with other people – in many cases I find that even spouses don't raise the matter with each other and as a result find themselves at sea when the inevitable happens and one dies before the other. On the other hand many people talk with supreme confidence about what happens after death without necessarily having any evidence for what they are saying. Folk religion and mumbo jumbo stand side by side with Christian teaching and with the increasingly strident voices of secular humanists.

For what it's worth, I think we need to be more open than we often are about talking about death, especially with those who

will be most deeply affected when we die, but that we base what we say about life after death on the Gospel rather than on folk religion, being sure of what we hope for in Christ without being too certain about the mechanics of it all (which are of course ultimately way beyond our ken).

People have all kinds of questions about what happens after we die and some of you have voiced those questions to me over the last few weeks. There are a lot of things we are not given answers to in the Bible and we should probably be content to leave matters in God's hands to a far greater extent than we often do. The big question in the early church was about what would happen to those who died before Jesus' return (which they expected imminently) and Paul simply highlights the fact that "God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." (1 Thess. 4:14) In other words, don't worry about where precisely your loved one may be at this moment in worldly time because they are safely in the care of our eternal God.

The question that Paul addresses here with the Corinthians concerns what kind of body the deceased will have at the resurrection, and that is reflected in the kind of question that people sometimes ask today about someone who has died. If they had some kind of physical or mental incapacity, would that remain with them after death. Paul put the question thus: "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come." (v.35)

The apostle doesn't give a direct answer to that question, not because there isn't an answer but because the answer is ultimately beyond our capacity fully to understand. What he *does* do, though, is highlight the fact that rising from the dead takes us not into some other version of life here and now but into a whole new dimension of living, a new creation that we may have the tiniest foretaste of here in spirit but which will be so much more than we can possibly imagine now.

Paul writes here about a large number of contrasts between what we have now 'in Adam' and what we will have 'in Christ' beyond the grave. As we said last time, 'as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive' – just as surely as our human bodies will die, so surely shall our spirits live. The one is earthly, the other is heavenly, the one is mortal, the other is immortal,

the one is perishable, the other is imperishable. In this world we are flesh and blood while in the next we will inherit the Kingdom of God. Here there is weakness, there there is power. In our sinful state we suffer the sting of death but by God's grace and through the forgiveness that Christ has won for us we receive the eternal victory.

These contrasts are probably best summed up in the pair that I used in the title of today's sermon - 'the natural and the spiritual' – and the apostle illustrates them by using a number of very helpful images that I want to explore with you briefly in the time we have left.

“How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come? How foolish!” says the apostle. Although all of us are much less connected than people once were with the natural world, I think most of us have a basic idea about how plants grow, and that's the first image Paul takes. We know that if you plant a seed something will grow, but what most of us don't tend to think about is that in order for the new plant to emerge and the fruit to come, the original seed will actually die. What emerges from the ground bears no resemblance to what you planted – depending on the type of thing you are growing there will be roots and stalks and stems and leaves and maybe a trunk and branches. Although Paul mentions wheat, I always like to use the example of a potato. If you have ever planted tatties you will know that when you come to harvest the crop the original seed potato will be nothing but a shell and some mush – it has actually died in order for the plant to grow and the fruit to be borne. Equally, no-one looking at a tiny dry seed could ever imagine the beautiful flower that will be produced by the plant that comes from that seed and very few who take delight in flowers would give a second thought to the seeds that have died in order for the blooms to flourish. We are just captivated by the beauty of what has grown. “God gives it a body as He has determined and to each kind of seed He gives its own body.” (v.38)

Now it may be hard to make the leap between the death of a loved one and the planting of a seed, but Paul is asking us to lay to rest what has been – the physical remains that have had their time – and to lift our eyes far above the restrictions of this world to the glorified body that will be, which will be as far greater

than our earthly body as a beautiful lily or magnolia is than the seed from which it grew and which is now gone.

We really need to engage our imagination. We can get our heads around the fact that the bodies of fish and birds and insects and animals are all so different; maybe we find it harder to get a hold of how different the moon is from the sun or how different our sun is from some of the other mighty stars in the universe; but it is yet another degree of difference altogether when we compare the natural and the spiritual, the mortal and the immortal, and that is what Paul is telling us we need to do rather than settling for an image of life after death that is little more than a slightly upgraded re-run of what we have here and now.

"The first man, Adam, became a living being, Paul writes; the last Adam (that is Jesus Christ) became a life-giving spirit." (v.45) The two simply cannot be compared. We are not even talking about the kind of amazing transformation that happens when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly or a waterbug becomes a dragonfly, incredible though that is. It's so much more still – the first man was of the dust of the earth but what we shall become in Christ, well, we just can't begin to imagine. "Listen, says Paul, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." (v.51-52)

As I was preparing for today I was put in mind of a hymn by Isaac Watts, a paraphrase of words from the 1st Letter of John (and if I'd thought about it earlier we might have sung it this morning). "High is the rank we now possess but higher we shall rise, though what we shall hereafter be is hid from mortal eyes. Our souls, we know, when He appears, shall bear His image bright, for all His glory, full disclosed shall open to our sight." What we will be singing is an equally appropriate hymn penned by Charles Wesley, that have a pretty good go at describing the indescribability of what lies ahead of us in Christ when this life comes to an end in death. "Finish, then, Thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be. Let us see Thy great salvation perfectly restored in Thee. *Changed from glory into glory* till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before Thee, lost in wonder, love and praise."

Do you have questions about life after death? If you do, then you are in good company, and I very much encourage you to ask those questions openly and to talk about these matters with your loved ones and with others in the church. Just don't expect to find a textbook explanation of everything you've ever wanted to know and whatever you do don't get bogged down in details. Rather, focus on grasping the big picture and on putting your trust in the One who has won the victory over death and opened the everlasting way for all who will put their hand in His and accept the invitation into life.

Paul closes this great chapter with these words: "Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain." (vv.57-58)

"If there is a natural body (which there is!), there is also a spiritual body." (1 Cor.15:44b)

Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed.**