

SERMON – 21/4/24

'What if...?'

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

"If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." (1 Cor.15:14)

Last Sunday we began to read the apostle Paul's great exploration of the resurrection of Christ as he brings his First Letter to the Corinthians to a close. Last Sunday we looked at what is effectively a summary of the contents of the Easter Gospel: that Christ died for our sins, that He was buried for us, that He was raised again from the dead on the third day and that He appeared in person to a considerable number of people. This morning we take up the chapter at verse 12 where Paul begins a short but very powerful section looking at what the consequences would be if there were no Easter Gospel.

Most of us at some point in our lives will have asked the 'What if...?' question in some form or another. Perhaps you have had a near miss in a car accident and you find yourself thinking about what might have been if you or someone else had been seriously hurt or even killed. Perhaps you have undergone medical tests to try and find an explanation for some physical symptoms you are experiencing and as you wait for the results your mind tries to imagine what the outcome might be if the tests identify some serious condition. Maybe on occasion you have paused to ponder how different your life might have been, for better or for worse, if you had made a different choice at some stage, or if you had perhaps never met a particular person who had a big influence on you.

Most often those 'What if...?' questions are a complete waste of time because you can't change the outcome of decisions or circumstances that are now in the past and no amount of regret will make a difference to the way things have turned out. We have to deal with things as they are and not as they might have been. But there can be some benefit if your aim is to highlight your gratitude for the fact that disaster *didn't* befall you or that you made a *good* choice or that you met the right person at the right time. Sometimes it is important to consider how different things might have been, and that's what I would like us to do

this morning in relation to the fact that we have heard and received the Easter Gospel.

As I said last week, it is my duty and privilege to proclaim the good news not only that Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins and that He was buried in our place but also that He was raised to life again to share His victory with all who will put their trust in Him. But, as Paul encourages us to consider in today's reading, what if none of that happened? Where would that have left us?

I was leading time for reflection at Kinross High School a couple of mornings this past week and in thinking about the process to select a jury in a certain high profile court case across the Atlantic we were speaking about what it means to have a mind that is open to the evidence that is put before you rather than making your mind up on the basis of what you may feel about an individual. I made reference to the book *Who Moved the Stone* by Frank Morrison written nearly 100 years ago now. Morrison set out with the intention of proving that the story of Christ's resurrection was nonsense and yet to his great surprise when he examined all the evidence he came to believe that it was true. As I said at the High School this week, we have nothing to fear from the truth, so in the same spirit as I would ask an unbeliever to consider 'What if the Gospel might be true?' I want to ask you this morning to consider the opposite: What if the Gospel is *not* true?

In the eight verses we read this morning Paul uses the Greek word for 'if' no fewer than six times and what I want to encourage you to do is (as it were) to stare down the barrel of the gun and consider what the consequences are if there is no Easter Gospel, so that you can give thanks for what we are blessed with in receiving the Gospel and also so that you can better understand the reality of what someone who does not believe may be experiencing and perhaps help them to grasp what a difference faith makes.

First of all Paul asks, "If it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" and he goes on to conclude that "If there is no resurrection of the dead then even Christ has not been raised." (vv.12-13) So is it even possible for the dead to

be raised? That is a question that has exercised people since the dawn of time. Psalm 49, written probably around 1000 years before Christ says, "For all can see that the wise die, that the foolish and the senseless also perish, leaving their wealth to others. Their tombs will remain their houses forever, their dwellings for endless generations, though they had named lands after themselves. People, despite their wealth, do not endure; they are like the beasts that perish." (Psalm 49:10-12) Now even though the psalmist goes on to declare a faith that "God will redeem me from the realm of the dead; he will surely take me to himself" (Psalm 49:15) it doesn't specifically mention resurrection and there was much debate even at the time of Jesus between the Pharisees and the Sadducees about whether there could even be such a thing as bodily resurrection.

But what Paul is referring to here is Christian preachers denying the possibility of resurrection, perhaps because even in Jesus' ministry and in the early church the return to life of someone who had died was something that happened only exceptionally. Perhaps these preachers were trying to play down the supernatural (and that is certainly something that has happened down the ages and in our own time) but what Paul was saying was that if you deny the very possibility of physical resurrection you are saying that even Christ could not have been raised.

"If Christ has not been raised, Paul goes on, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." (v.14) And the consequences of that are huge. I have given more than 35 years to preaching the Gospel and if all of that is based on a fundamental untruth then I am not only guilty of lying but also of leading hundreds if not thousands of people completely up the garden path, and all of us here today and the hundreds and thousands (millions indeed) who are at worship today around the world are spouting empty words, deluded by a meaningless message and passing on an empty tradition. I have heard it argued by those who preach a resurrectionless message that all that matters is that you are a person of faith, but if that faith is in a Jesus who died a martyr's death, whose decayed remains lie somewhere unknown and whose legacy is founded on what one famous sceptic described as 'a conjuring trick with bones' then it is surely of deeply questionable value. Christian faith cannot be founded on wishful thinking or it is indeed 'pie in the sky'.

Paul drives home the reality of what he is saying: "If the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either and if Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins, and those who have fallen asleep in Christ have been lost." (vv.16-18) It's utterly disastrous and it's right for us to say that out loud today – if there is no resurrection what is there?

But as it was to dawn on Frank Morrison as he tried to make sense of how Jesus' eleven frightened disciples and their companions might have concocted a story about Jesus rising from the dead, how would they not only have convinced others of the truth of their lie but been prepared to suffer and die for it as they travelled to the ends of the known world turning it upside down as they went? To suggest that Christ was *not* raised from the dead is actually more unbelievable in the face of the evidence than to take God at His Word. When Jesus' first followers went to the Tomb that first Easter morning their conviction was that the Teacher was dead. When the women first came to tell the apostles that Christ had fulfilled His promise and had risen from the dead they simply would not believe them. What happened to change their minds and fire them for the truly remarkable global mission they went on. *Something* happened.

My friends, as Paul concludes here, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (v.19) You know if I didn't have the courage of my convictions I would be the first to urge you to get up and go from here right now and to start dismantling the framework not only of your spiritual life but of the Christian values and the way of life that spring from it. In fact you would have to question not only the institution of the church but the whole fabric of our society – our legal system, our education system, our health and social care system – which is based on Christian principles that all owe their basis to the Gospel message and the spark that sets it on fire, that Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.

Paul takes a risk in what he writes to the Corinthians, acknowledging the possibility that he has got it all wrong, and I suppose I am taking that same risk here this morning. What if I have sown a seed of doubt in someone's mind here today? Well if you have been troubled by anything you have heard from me this morning, don't go away without having a word with me,

because while I think it is important for all of us to have an open mind and to entertain the possibility that we may have got it wrong, I for one have found that in asking that 'What if' question I have in fact grown more confident in this Easter Gospel.

Jesus is risen and He is alive and active among His people here and across the world today and as a result of that, far from being in vain our preaching is vital, far from being useless our faith is the gateway to eternal life, far from bearing false witness we are declaring the truth that sets people free, far from being stuck in our sins we are forgiven and set free to live life in its fulness, far from needing to be pitied we are needing to be heard as we proclaim for all the world to hear: Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!