The Vanity of Life and the Victory of Christ
1 Cor 15: 1-20; 31-34; 50-58

Without doubt Christianity is strange. By which I mean, it's built on something that not even its first leaders believed when they were first told it. In fact, they dismissed it as an idle tale. But you can hardly blame them, can you? I mean, have you ever seen a dead body? Because the apostles had. At least once. The body of Jesus himself. And you only have to see a dead body to know, it's not coming back to life again.

And yet, within days of Jesus' death, those first leaders went out onto the streets proclaiming that's exactly what had happened. That Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead.

Now, if you go out to Chinese or Indian restaurant, you get this wonderful selection of starters and side dishes don't you. But the truth is, you could exercise self-control, and not go for any of those and still have a wonderful and authentic meal couldn't you? And when I was a boy there was an infamous Bishop in the Church of England who described the resurrection of Jesus as a trick of bones. That he *didn't* really rise from the dead. That his resurrection is *not* central to the message of Christianity. In other words, the resurrection is a side dish, not the main course.

To which the apostle Paul would say 'what?' Which is Greek for 'That is cobblers.'

Look at v3: 'For I delivered to you *as of first importance*' - meaning, ok here is the main course stuff, this is not the stuff of side salads. Miss this and you are missing the whole meal, 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, *that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures*, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time…' and the list goes on.

So the resurrection of Jesus, Paul says, is the thing that Christianity stands or falls on.

Why? Why make something that even the apostles did not believe, at the beginning, *the* central message of their message?

Well, that's what's interesting, isn't it. Because look what Paul writes, and it's not simply that it happened and we need to believe facts not fiction, though that is true.

The reason it's of central importance, Paul says, is all about a four letter word. But while the word is small, its implications are huge. And it's the word 'vain'.

Because let's face it, does your life have any meaning whatsoever, or is it just vain?

The Vanity of Life
Look at v14: 'If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain.'

And what Paul does in this chapter is to spell out the pointlessness of Christianity if Christ has not been raised - starting with what he and the other apostles spend their lives doing. Because if they are going round telling people Jesus rose from the dead, and that did not happen, they are wasting their lives.

But it's not just *how* they spend their time, but the suffering they face for doing it that's pointless. Verse 32, 'what do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised…'

What do I gain? Nothing. Just scars and insults and all for nothing.

Not only that, but if there is a God, but he has *not* raised Jesus from the dead, then it's not just that they're misleading people, v15, 'We are even found to be misrepresenting God.' Now, when I was an undergrad trying to decide, 'do I tell Su how I feel about her or not? Because I want to marry her, but we're just friends and I don't want to lose that friendship and I'm English and awkward and don't know what to do', I decided to go speak to an older couple, Jeremy and Katie, from church who knew Su and me well. And I said, look this is how I feel, but I have no idea how Su feels, so do I ask her or not. To which Jeremy said, 'well Katie says that if you ask Su she'll say yes.' To which Katie said, 'I did not say that Jeremy!'

Now why did she react like that? Because Jeremy was misrepresenting her. Which when you're dealing with Martin Slack's love life is forgivable, but you do not want to do that with God. But if God did not raise Jesus, that's exactly what we are doing, Paul says. And to give your life for a lie like that is the definition of pointlessness, Paul is saying.

And yet, this is not just a problem for Christians is it? It's also a problem for the secular person. Because if you're not yet a Christian you might respond to Paul by saying, 'well, that's the problem with religion, you should have done something useful with your life. Something that does have meaning.'

Ok, but if there is no God, there's no point or meaning to anything, is there. You exist and then you die. And one day the universe will die. So any attempt to create your own meaning is the stuff of smoke and mirrors. In which case, whether you spend your life working for a great not-for-profit or for a not so great maximise the profit of some anonymous share holders, or whether you're a stay at home mum or spend your life securing research grants and writing papers, what are you doing it for? Ultimately, for nothing - for a long eternal silence… if there is no God.

But Paul says, it's not just our work that's in vain. Verse 14 again, 'If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain *and your faith is in vain*.' So for a Christian, if Christ died and stayed that way, to build your life around him is pointless, Paul says.

But again, if that's true for the life of the Christian, it's also true if you're not yet a Christian, isn't it? I mean, look what Paul says in v32, 'If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." And Paul's quoting the prophet Isaiah, as the people of Israel face the impending judgment of God. That if all that's coming is death and destruction, why not just live for the pleasure of the moment?

But if there is no God and death *is* the only thing we have to look forward to, that nihilistic, hedonistic - life-has-no-ultimate-meaning - approach to life is correct, isn't it? So eat and drink for tomorrow we die. And yet, deep down you know there has to be more to life than the fleeting pleasures, or pains of life. That life is more than just getting the next meal or next drink; that you're more than an animal. And so if you're not yet a Christian, if you're honest, can your worldview really explain the deepest intuition of your heart, that life does have meaning?

Ok, but then Paul homes in on one reason in particular why living a life of faith is vain, v17: 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile *and you are still in your sins*.'

Now, you might think, 'isn't the death of Christ enough? I mean, if he's the sacrifice for sins, then the sacrifice's been made and the debt's been paid.' Sure, but has God accepted it? You see, elsewhere Paul writes that Jesus 'was delivered up for our trespasses *and raised for our justification*' (Rom 4:25). That it was God raising Jesus from the dead that tells us, Jesus really was the sinless sacrifice acceptable to God. That God has vindicated him and justified us. And as his resurrection proves him right, so it declares us forgiven.

Now again, if you're not a Christian, you might go, 'yeh, but that's not a problem for me. If you Christians want to get all hung up about sin, that's up to you.'

Sure, but when you feel guilty, how do you atone for your sins, or at least how do you quiet your conscience? Because we all have that inner sense of right and wrong, that tells you you're accountable in someway. So what do you do when you feel guilty? Because squashing your conscience is never a good idea, is it?

But it's not just about the forgiveness of sin, think about the multiplication of sin. You see, if there is no God, and no resurrection, and no final judgement, then what's to stop people taking justice into their own hands, or the strong squashing the weak, if in this life we can get away with it?

So, if there is no resurrection then the Christian faces no forgiveness of sin. But the secular person faces no end to sin.

But… if life and work are pointless, so too is death. Verse 18-19, If there is no resurrection, 'then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.' Because, if this life *is* all there is, then death makes a mockery of life and all we've tried to do with our lives. And when our loved ones die and are gone, they're gone for good.

Ok, but there's one last thing that's vain and pointless Paul says - or at least he implies it. And that's our bodies. Because in v42-44 Paul uses the image of sowing seeds for our bodies being sown into the ground in death. But look how he describes those bodies, v42: 'What is sown is perishable… it is sown in dishonour… it is sown in weakness.'

Now, we live in an age where it can seem like the body is everything. And you go to the gym, or the plastic surgeon, to get the body you want. But of course such an age can also leave us looking in the mirror and hating what we see. But whatever you see, our bodies *are* slowly crumbling and no amount of gym membership or botox can stop it. And so when Paul says our bodies are perishable, or something we can be ashamed of, or that they grow weak, he's not being depressive. He's being real.

But such talk is like a pin to the balloon of our self-importance, isn't it. It's like telling the young guy at the gym, go ahead and pull those weights buddy, because one day the worms will thank you.

So whether it's our work, or life, or death, or the slow decay of our bodies in between, Paul is saying, if there is no God and Christ has not been raised from the dead, and if this life is all there is, then all of life really is vain. It's meaningless.

But what if that is not the case?

The Victory of Christ
Verse 20, 'But *in fact* Christ *has* been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.'

But in fact - as the witnesses that Paul lists could have testified. *But in fact* - as Peter, and the other disciples, and the 500 brothers, 'most of whom are still alive,' Paul says, and James, Jesus' brother, could have told you, Jesus has been raised from the dead. And lastly, v8-9, 'he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.'

Because what can explain the conversion of a Christian-killing Paul? What can explain why the disciples, who dismissed the account of the women that the tomb was empty as idle talk, yet within days became it's strongest and clearest proclaimers? And what would persuade James, Jesus' brother, to start worshipping his brother as God? I mean, would you worship your brother or sister as God? In fact, what would persuade any of these Jewish men, to worship a man as God? And what would persuade them to change their day of worship from the Sabbath - Saturday - to a Sunday and call it the Lord's Day, when the Sabbath was at the very heart of their identity as Jews? And what would persuade them, virtually to a man, to die proclaiming, we saw him risen from the dead?

'Ah!' you might say, 'plenty of religious people die for a cause they believe to be right.' Sure, but not for a cause they know to be false.

And so the one satisfying answer to any of that, is the one Paul gives: 'But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.'

And, Paul says, Jesus is just the first fruits. The first fruits that tell you the harvest is coming. And we are that harvest. Verses 21-23: 'For as by one man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.'

Which means that ultimately, the decay and death of our bodies is not pointless. Verses 42-44: 'What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.'

And if death makes a mockery of life, then the resurrection of Christ makes a mockery of death. Verses 52-57: 'For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed… then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death where is your sting?"… Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.'

But Paul says there's another thing that Jesus' resurrection tells you. It's not just that he's be raised, it's that he's reigning. Verse 25-26, 'For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. [And] The last enemy to be destroyed is death.'

In other words, don't be fooled by appearances. Because as you look at the world, or just at your life, it can look like sin and death are reigning. They're not, Paul says, Jesus is. So see all of life - and death - your work and your bodies, from the viewing platform of the resurrection, and as you do it will transform your life.

The Value of Life and Labour

Now, you almost certainly know what it's like to bite into a jam-filled donut, don't you. Because what happens? The jam squirts everywhere. Why? Because it's filled with jam. And Paul is saying, when you let the sweetness of the truth of the resurrection of Christ fill your heart and your mind then life will be bursting with meaning, like that donut bursts with jam.

Look at v58, 'Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.'

In other words, given that Christ is risen, given that death has been swallowed up in victory, given that Christ is reigning, be steadfast.

What does that mean? Well he doesn't tell us, does he, but go back up to v33-34 and you'll see his description of the person who's the opposite of steadfast: 'Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning."

And the staggering, almost comatose drunk, the man who's had a skinful and can barely stand, is the exact of opposite of what it means to be steadfast, isn't he? But what's he been drinking? Verse 32, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." He's been drinking the deception of nihilism and hedonism that says, life has no meaning, and there are no absolutes, and death is an end, so live however you want. No, Paul says, Christ is risen, and resurrection day will be reward day, so don't go on sinning, see temptation for what it is, in the light of the empty tomb, and instead, pursue a life of virtue.

But secondly, know that Christ has risen from the dead and you will be steadfast in the face of death - whether that's your own or those you love. As Paul writes to the Thessalonians, we do 'not grieve as others do *who have no hope*' (1 Thess 4:13). Note what he doesn't say. He doesn't say, hey we're Christians, we don't grieve. He says, don't grieve as those who have no hope. Because when we lose someone we love we grieve, because we long for the world of no more goodbyes. But we grieve with hope, resurrection hope, that-world-of-no-more-goodbyes-is-coming hope.

Thirdly, know that Christ is risen and reigning and it will transform the way you see your work. Verse 58 again, 'Be steadfast, immovable, *always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.'*

So far from work being vain and meaningless - it's abounding in meaning, which means we can abound in the work of the Lord. Because now, we don't work for ourselves or others but for him. As Paul says in v10, 'By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them.' Because when you realise, Christ is risen and reigning, any setbacks you face, any opposition you endure, any hardship you bear, is just temporary. Resurrection day is coming.

Plus, knowing Christ is risen will give you the courage you need when you have to risk. Listen to Paul in v30-32, 'Why are we in danger every hour?… I die every day…I fought wild beasts at Ephesus…' And no one could accuse Paul of living a risk averse, play it safe and aim for comfort life, could they. But if you live like that, if your money, your reputation, your career is what's most important to you, you'll always be at risk of compromising your integrity to keep hold of them. But when you know Christ is risen, you'll be willing to risk those temporary things, when you need to, for the things that *really* matter in life.

So, Christ is risen. So be steadfast, immovable, and abound in Christ's work - because all of life is filled with meaning.