

SCHEME 1

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MONDAY APRIL 5

1 Corinthians 15:12-19 – no resurrection?

12 But 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?

13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

15 More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised.

16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either.

17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.

18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.

19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

When I was training for ordination in the 1990's, we had a memorable week in college with a dynamic and somewhat fiery Christian leader from the Indian subcontinent. He told us the story of a visit to England he had made, when he had been invited to preach in a certain parish church on Easter Sunday. He talked to the children. 'What does Easter mean?' he asked them. They called out various answers, all to do with Easter eggs and fluffy bunnies. My Indian friend was horrified. 'I gave them hell!' he told us. I can only hope he was addressing the parents at this point and not the children!

But I do find it as disappointing as he did that many of us don't really seem to see Easter as terribly important. The implications of the resurrection of the Lord are enormous. I remember the tragic death of a young man in the parish where I lived back in the 1970's. Apparently he had blacked out while driving his car; the crash that followed was fatal. I visited the bereaved family shortly after; they lived just around the corner from my house. 'I don't believe there's anything after death' the father said to me, and it showed on his face. He died a year later; I have always wondered if he died of a broken heart.

Enter Paul, devoting a whole long chapter 15 in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth to the Lord's resurrection. The Christian faith is a resurrection faith, he insists. If there's no resurrection, we deserve not admiration but pity. And the reason he writes so strongly is that, at the beginning of the chapter, he can list all the people who had seen the risen Jesus in the period that followed the first Easter day. In that culture, eye witness testimony was supremely important. That there were all these eye witnesses to the resurrection still alive and kicking some twenty years after the event was a powerful argument.

So I'm devoting this final week of daily reflections to the theme of resurrection. All sorts of things follow from our Lord's rising from the tomb. The gospels spell some of them out, and we'll be hearing about those in church services during the next few Sundays. Many of the

letters that make up a large part of the New Testament spell out others, and that's where I'm going to dwell this week.

But someone might object: I don't want to be told I'm going to heaven when I die; I'm more concerned about a faith that means something in the here and now! Absolutely right. All the more reason for journeying with Paul through these next few days, because he would agree with you.

TUESDAY APRIL 6

Colossians 2:6-15 – living in the in-between times

6 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him,
7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.
8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.
9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,
10 and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.
11 In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ,
12 having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.
13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,
14 having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.
15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

I was preaching at a family service in a church near where I live. There were lots of children there. I put up a banner. On it was printed a date, in large letters: June 6 1944. 'What happened on June 6, 1944?' I asked them. A moment's silence then a little boy in the front row put his hand up. He's too young to know the answer to this, I thought to myself, but I asked him for his answer. 'Please can I go to the toilet?' he asked, loudly enough for the whole congregation to hear. The place dissolved in laughter for a few minutes as I gave him the required permission. Whether the rest of the congregation remembered anything else I said that morning is very doubtful!

June 6 1944 was, of course, D-Day, the day in the Second World War when Allied forces landed on the beaches of Normandy. I also asked the congregation that morning about May 8 1945. That was VE Day, when German forces surrendered unconditionally to the allied forces, and the war in Europe was over at last.

The German theologian Oscar Cullman likened Christian living in this world to being in Europe between D-Day and VE-Day: conflict raging all around – when would it all end? It is only as we look back on World War 2 that we see the significance of those two dates. We now know that the first was the decisive turning point in the war; the second, the surrender of the enemy and the end of the war, was only to come sometime later.

In his letter to the Christians in Colossae, Paul talks about the cross of Christ as the place where sin and evil have been defeated; the resurrection is the demonstration of that victory. But a moment's thought is enough to persuade you that it really doesn't look like that in our world,

arguably more unstable now than it has been for many years. We express something of the frustration of this when we ask the questions expressed in the hymn 'Thy kingdom come, O God'.

Yes, says Oscar Cullman, our D-Day was the cross of Christ, but our VE-Day is still to come, we know not when. Until that day, the battle rages all around us. Sin, evil and death – our sworn enemies – have been defeated but they have not surrendered – not yet. So we have to live in the between times, with all their frustrations and their pain, our D-Day behind us and our VE-Day still in God's future. But this is the bigger meaning – the meaning that is so easily overlooked - of the cross and resurrection, of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

WEDNESDAY APRIL 7

Romans 6:1-10 – facing in the opposite direction

1 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?

2 By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

5 If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.

6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—

7 because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.

10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

Let's continue our journey through some of the letters in the New Testament that tell us what flows from the Lord's resurrection on that first Easter day. Consider this, says Paul to the Christians in Rome: in the same way that Jesus died and was then raised to new life, that has to be the same for you as well. And that's the meaning of baptism, though it's not always understood that way. But wait a minute, someone might say: how can I die the way Jesus did and come back again? Death is the end of my earthly life, surely?

Yes, that's a good question, but what Paul is talking about is how you die to an old way of life and rise again to a new way of living. Have you ever been at a service where an adult is baptised not with a few drops of water from a rather nice little font, but in a huge tank filled with water, or at a river bank, or in the sea? What you see there is the candidate dunked completely under the water, probably three times. Each time, they disappear from view; then they suddenly burst upward out of the water. It's a powerful picture of death and resurrection. In the early centuries of the church, adults were baptised at Easter after a long period of careful preparation. I read somewhere that, shortly before they were baptised there was a ceremony of renunciation. They turned to the west – the direction of the setting sun, of the end of the day, and they renounced everything that they knew was wrong about the way they had lived. Then they faced east – the direction of the rising sun, of a new day dawning, to embrace a new way of living.

What resurrection means here is the death of an old way of life, and the birth of a new one. Sometimes it's a dramatic turn of events; I once met a man who was a confidence trickster – that is, until he became a Christian. He left it all behind. Sometimes it's rather less spectacular than that. In the same church where I first met the ex-conman, I also met Rick, Jack and

Stephen. I was still a research student at university, and I was visiting an old school friend and his wife. He took me to the Men's Fellowship at the church they belonged to. Those three guys made a huge impression on me; I played darts and bowls with them all evening; we drank coffee together. In some ways they were very ordinary but there was something *different* about them. They weren't 'religious', they didn't preach at me (I had no faith in those days) but I liked what I saw, what they seemed to quietly radiate.

Ah, I can hear Paul say, that's exactly the sort of thing I had in mind!

THURSDAY APRIL 8

Colossians 3:1-17 – too heavenly-minded?

1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

4 When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.

7 You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.

8 But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

9 Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices

10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

11 Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

The evening before writing this I watched the latest episode of ITV's long-running crime series *Midsomer Murders*. Here we have a sleepy part of rural England, a collection of idyllic villages, where well over 200 people have been bumped off over the years. If I say that some of the villagers that we encounter appear to be a little eccentric, that is to put it very mildly indeed. Among the most eccentric – and a few of them give the impression of being barking mad – are the local clergy. No wonder some of their churches are sparsely attended. Some of them are definitely too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly use. Then there's the old comedy series *All Gas and Gaiters*, featuring the Bishop of St. Oggs, the Dean, the Archdeacon (who was slightly too fond of his glass of sherry), and the horribly heavenly-minded Bishop's Chaplain Noote, superbly played by the one-and-only Derek Nimmo.

Thank goodness for *The Archers*, Radio 4's long-running 15 minutes per weekday evening soap, set in the village of Ambridge in rural Borsetshire, somewhere in the West Midlands of England. The local vicars have played a large part in some of the story lines over the years, including the current incumbent Alan Franks. Too heavenly-minded to be of any early use? After all, isn't that what Paul told Christians should be like, at the beginning of the third chapter of his letter to the Christians in Colossae?

No, Alan Franks definitely has his feet on the ground, and comes across as a thoroughly likeable, caring, compassionate and patient man. Which brings me back to Paul's command to 'Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.' It's not about *Midsomer Murders*' vicars, nor about Bishop's Chaplain Noot. Read what Paul says and you'll discover it's about a different way of living. The 'heavenly-minded' way – the way of resurrection, the way that baptism anticipates – is all about the quality of our relationships: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, thankfulness.

That is what resurrection life is all about – how we live in the here and now every bit as much as looking forward to what we commonly think of as 'going to heaven when we die'. Then cast your mind over that list of resurrection life-qualities again: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, thankfulness. There's something really rather attractive about them, isn't there? Now cast your mind further, and identify the people you know who exemplify them; I'm sure everyone can think of at least a few.

One final thought: wouldn't it be nice to think that this is the sort of thing other people can see in *you*! Why not make that something you keep coming back to in your prayers. Pray it, and then do expect the Lord to get on with his resurrection work in your life in answer to your prayer.

FRIDAY APRIL 9

Ephesians 1:15–23 – resurrection power

15 For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints,

16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,

19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength,

20 which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,

21 far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

22 And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,

23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

When I read the prayers that Paul prays for the different Christian congregations that he writes to, I'm always struck by how ambitious they are; they sometimes put my own prayers for others, and for myself, to shame – so puny, so lacking in vision! And then I think to myself: why the difference? I suspect it's because Paul had a far greater understanding than me of the huge implications of the death and resurrection of the Lord.

So when I read Ephesians chapter 1, I keep coming across something I so easily forget: that when God is at work in the lives of His people, as I know He is, the 'incomparably great power' that He is wielding is the same power He wielded when He raised our Lord from the dead. No wonder Paul's prayers for other people are so ambitious. If you read this particular prayer in Ephesians chapter 1, it's so bursting with vision that you'll find it doesn't finish until the end of chapter 3!

And as I reflect upon this further, I think of particular instances where the awesome nature of this power is especially visible. In 1980 we visited Kenya. At Nairobi airport we were met by two missionaries from Uganda – Jim and Jean. That evening, over a meal, they talked of stressful times in war-torn Uganda, first of all under the brutal regime of Idi Amin and then with a Tanzanian army force running things and trying to help the country get back on its feet again. On one occasion Jim had fallen foul of an awkward local police officer and had been locked up for a day or so. Jean, being a somewhat forthright lady, marched into the police station and demanded: 'If you've put my husband in jail then go ahead and put me in jail as well!' So he did. Not exactly a bed of roses, as you might imagine: what happened next was startling. This is how Jean described it, and I still remember her exact words 40 years later:

'Jesus was so close that night I could have reached out and touched him'. Was it her imagination playing tricks on her? Possibly, but I suspect not.

Then I remember visiting a parishioner, an elderly lady, who recalled being in hospital on one occasion. 'I saw Jesus standing at the end of my bed' she said. Again: a lady with an over-vivid imagination? If you had known her as I did, you would have known that she wasn't like that at all. Now you may think that her experience, and Jean's in Uganda, were rather exceptional. You could be right. But what they do is challenge us to raise our expectations, including how to pray and what to pray for as we pray for ourselves, as I urge you to do. So: next time you pray for yourself, what exactly are you going to pray for: something safe, or something *daring*?

SATURDAY APRIL 10 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 – keep on keeping on

50 I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—

52 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.

53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

55 “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

The story is told of a day when Margaret Thatcher won another General Election. A crowd gathered outside Buckingham Palace where they would catch a glimpse of her as she arrived to seek the Queen’s permission to form a new government. She was delayed; the crowd drifted away, except for one young mum with a pram. When Mrs Thatcher still did not appear, she made to go home, until she heard a voice: ‘Don’t go.’ She looked around. No-one there. A few more minutes passed. Still no appearance by Mrs Thatcher. Again, she started to walk away. Then, again: ‘Don’t go.’ She looked around and there, not far away, was a policeman, the obvious source of the voice. ‘Why not?’ she asked. His lips not moving, he replied, ‘Can’t say. Don’t go’. And a few minutes later she was rewarded with the sight of Mrs Thatcher arriving at Buckingham Palace to meet the Queen.

What has that to do, you may wonder, with the closing words of Paul’s long chapter 15 of his first letter to the church in Corinth? This is what he wrote:

“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 labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

The connection is this: PERSEVERANCE, a theme we spent a week on during Lent. Paul is telling us that we make a big mistake if we imagine that what we call ‘heaven’ is going to be entirely unconnected with this life, and it’s another big mistake to see this life as waiting for that heaven. Between what now is and what is still to come are elements of *discontinuity* and there are elements of *continuity*, just as my crop of potatoes are growing out of the seed potatoes I planted a few days ago. I want to live a resurrection-fuelled life in the here-and-now marked as far as is possible by qualities of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness,

patience, forgiveness, love, peace and thankfulness. But what's the point, someone might still object. When you die you'll leave it all behind. To which the Christian answer is: no, I won't. It is what is still to come that gives meaning and direction to how we live now. When Jesus was raised from the dead on that first Easter morning, the life of the new kingdom burst out with Him, invading the present. Eternal life has already begun. All of this gives full force to the glorious words with which 1 Corinthians chapter 15 ends:

“Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

And that is the message of the resurrection, to cheer us on our way, as we continue to journey through this pandemic.