

April 12, 2009

In the reading we've heard this morning, Paul speaks to the Corinthians of "...[the gospel] through which you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you – *unless you have come to believe in vain*" (NRSV). He then goes on to give an account of a series of resurrection appearances, culminating in the appearance to Paul himself quite a long time after the crucifixion.

What I want to focus on this morning, is the final phrase of the section I've just quoted: "unless you have come to believe in vain." One scholar has recently put to this little line a sense which seems to me to be particularly useful for the task of thinking about *thinking* about the resurrection of Jesus: "...unless you believed *without coherent consideration*"¹. I want, this morning, to pull apart what "coherent consideration" – or sensible thought – of the resurrection of Jesus might look or feel like, because *sensible* thought is not something which characterises most thinking about the resurrection, whether thought by those who believe or by those who don't.

Now, when it comes to talk of the resurrection of Jesus, the question which presents to most people's minds almost straightaway, of course, is something like, "did it really happen?", and this question is, surely, fair enough! But, however hard we might think it is to *answer* this question, it is in fact at least as hard actually to *ask* it *properly*. Asking an *honest and open* question about the resurrection of Jesus may even verge upon being impossible for most of us, if not all. To recognise this we need to note two things. The first is that, whether or not we finally believe it to be true, the story of the resurrection *wants* to be an all-embracing, world-shaking, gut-wrenching, head-spinning, life-transforming proclamation. That is, it wants to *make a difference*, and a difference which goes right to the heart of our world and existence. It is

the end, and the beginning, and so also the centre of the Christian story. If what we are talking about does not threaten to press in on us in this all-affecting way then it is not the resurrection of Jesus. But we'll come back to this first point later.

For the moment we'll focus on the second thing which makes it almost impossible to ask an honest question about the resurrection, which is that human beings are pretty bad at taking seriously anything which might matter in this all-embracing kind of way. Let us try a thought experiment. Put aside for a moment any objection you might have to the possibility of resurrection and ask yourself an honest question: if it *were* the case that this happened – that Jesus rose from the dead – and you were somehow convinced of the *fact* of it, what *difference* would it make to you?

I put it to you that it would probably not make much difference at all. And the reason is, to put it rather bluntly, that people are pretty stupid! I offer as proof of this the following. However well proven or not we might think the resurrection of Jesus is, let us consider some more familiar proofs and their significance for us: It *is* established pretty much incontrovertibly that smoking is very bad for you, that drinking to excess is very bad for you, that narcotics and prescription drug addictions are very bad for you, that sexual promiscuity exposes you to all sorts of health risks, that driving too fast gets people killed, that too much salt, fat and sugar wreaks havoc with our health, that "the house always wins", that predators of children get caught, that philanderers are exposed, that if we kill our enemies their children will want to kill us, that "populate or perish" has physical limits, that unrestrained consumption cannot be sustained, that we are running out of oil, that we are facing significant and possibly even catastrophic climate change, and so on.

AND YET, we continue to smoke, drink, treat our bodies as garbage disposers, gamble, speed, betray, kill, breed, consume and burn as if what we know about these things, in

¹ Anthony Thiselton (2000), [The first epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text](#), Grand Rapids, Eerdmans.

fact, is *not* the case. The point is that what we *know* – as a “fact” – doesn’t necessarily, or even often, make a lot of difference to how we *act*. Rather, we live “wishfully” – blindly – as if it won’t happen to us, or maybe only *wanting* it not to happen to us, *imagining* that our wish will change the order of things but deep down knowing all the while that it certainly won’t. I doubt that there are many, if any, who are free of this kind of self-delusion at some point (or many points) in the way they live their lives – knowing something which really should matter and yet living as if it were not the case.

Now, my intention here is not to moralise on human stupidity but simply to illustrate that it’s no easy thing to come to a real, honest conclusion about the claimed resurrection of Jesus – and any resurrection we ourselves might enjoy. If more or less irrefutable data on the effects of smoking or eating rubbish or drinking and driving don’t convince us to change our behaviour, then do we really imagine that a “proof” of the resurrection of Jesus is something even worth pursuing?

A question asks about resurrection without feeling the *force* of what a “yes” answer might mean would have to be called an empty, or even a dishonest question. If we ask the question about the resurrection of Jesus in such a way that we don’t think the answer would really *change* us then, in Paul’s terms, we are “believing without coherent consideration” or, we could add, *disbelieving* without coherent consideration. We’ve not felt the anxiety at which talk of the resurrection is directed, or the anxiety which it ought to produce.

The mere *fact* that something like the resurrection might have happened is likely to be, for us, neither nor there. The problem is that “facts” generally don’t really interest us. We are distracted by them, but they don’t really change us. We are less logical and rational than we might imagine, which matters when logic and rationality are the reasons usually given for dismissing the resurrection.

Or, perhaps more accurately, we are very often *thoroughly* rational, according to the way of thinking which most has us in its grip. The question is, what kind of thinking is it which pretends to trust science and logic to tell us most about ourselves or the world,

and yet ignores the results of that research and continues in destructive behaviours? Our willingness to live dangerously in spite of what we know suggests that ours is, in fact, fundamentally a death-denying world-view. If in this way we do deny death’s approach by risking or wasting our lives and resources, then it should scarcely surprise us that we are not interested in talk of resurrection. We live almost as if we don’t *need* resurrection, for death no longer concerns us. (This seems, in fact, to have been part of the problem Paul sought to address in the Corinthians to whom he wrote).

Now, the point of all that diatribe is simply to propose this: that the question about the resurrection of Jesus – our typical “did it really happen?” question – is rarely an open or honest one. That is, we simply aren’t *able* to take seriously a “yes” answer, and so the more common “no” answer doesn’t really mean anything either. We might be able to force ourselves to believe, or we might be persuaded by historical evidence and arguments (of which there are many), but this is really no further advance on not believing.

To get back to Paul’s little, throw-away line: it is possible to believe, or not believe, “without coherent consideration”, without sensible thought. More than possible, it is typical that the resurrection is believed (or not) in this way. And so, for example, it is typical that when we say the creed a majority of people will feel uncomfortable or uncertain at the mention of the resurrection of Jesus and the more general “resurrection of the dead”. More than that, many will fall silent at that point, and pick it up again a little later.

Perhaps it is appropriate to fall silent at that point, but not because we’re unconvinced of the facts. We ought to hesitate to declare too loudly that Jesus is risen just because it is too big a thought to get our head around, let alone to adjust our lives to. We ought to hesitate here because, if he were truly risen, it would not only mean that a marvellous thing “happened”; it would make *death* more serious a matter – for sensible, coherent talk of resurrection only makes sense when death is a *real* threat.

I suggested before that we are basically death-deniers. We live our lives in such a way that death doesn’t really impinge upon

us. We don't really think that our abuse of our bodies by way of what we put in them will make a difference in the end; we don't really think that our consumption of resources will make a difference to us or the environment in the end; we don't really think that the impact of our lifestyle upon others in our society or on the other side of the world matters that much. If we *did* think that such deathly things mattered, we'd stop, or at least try to change direction, or at least *confess* that we *are* stuck and *can't* really do anything to change ourselves or the lot of others. This would at least be honest.

For we should be honest, and brave, and choose not to suffer the fool who lives in us all. If Jesus' resurrection is anything that is truly *interesting* – truly worth saying yes or no to, then our question about whether or not it "actually" happened is really neither here nor there, or at least not the place where we must begin. In our approach to the question about the resurrection of Jesus – if it is to be honest – perhaps we should start with ourselves. Perhaps we should ask not "did it happen?", as if the answer would actually make a difference. Rather, perhaps we ask: do we not *need* the resurrection of Jesus to happen? Do we not *need* such a thing to expose the truth about ourselves and the way we live? Do we not *need* a call to a life which is not simply a covering-over of our impending death but which now has death behind it, no longer to be feared because it has been overcome? Do we not need to be prompted into "coherent consideration" and sensible thought about what it means truly to be human – honest, alive and free?

I confess that *I* do, at least. And so, for the sake of making sense of the life I live and the death I will die, I declare: Jesus *is* risen, to the glory of God, and that we might truly be ourselves. "This is the LORD'S doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes" (Ps 118). So let us rejoice and be glad in this good news. Amen.