1 Corinthians 15:35-58
The last enemy – Part II
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Ashley Smith was just another unknown American woman until last week when she was catapulted into the news as the hostage of Brian Nicols. Nicols had escaped while on trial for rape, shooting a judge, a court report, a police officer and a US customs official. During the 7 hour episode Nicols was initially violent but later listened as Ashley Smith read to him from the Bible and encouraged him to put his trust in Jesus Christ.

Here's how The Times reported it:

"In effect Smith was holding out to Nicols nothing less than the prospect of old-fashioned absolution and redemption. Nicols has imagined that his life was now effectively over and certainly worthless. "He told me he was already dead." Smith asserted. No so, she told him. Accept your punishment. When you get to prison spread the message of hope, even in the midst of hopelessness."

Now who knows what the result of that conversation will be. Will Brian Nicols be genuinely converted and repent of his sins?

I can't say. But there is no doubt that hope is a powerful force in human lives. As someone on the radio said only this week *"the healing of the mind is hope."*

Without hope human beings quickly go off the rails – both as individuals and as whole societies. And exactly the same is true of churches. If churches do not have the right hope they will end up with all sorts of peculiar things happening. Which is exactly what had happened in the church at Corinth.

In many ways chapter 15 is the theological key, the absolute centre point to helping us to understand what was happening in the church at Corinth 2,000 years ago.

We looked at the main symptom of their problem – a lack of love for each other – back in chapter 13. But that was only a symptom. The cause, the error in their thinking about God that was responsible for all the problems in their church lies here in chapter 15.

Look at v12: *how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead.*

Some people in the Corinthian church had moved away from believing in Christian hope.

And when you think about it that explains so much of what we have seen in this letter.

It explains why they thought, in 4:8, that they were rich, that they had all they wanted, that they were kings NOW. Because if there is no future hope, or if the future is some disembodied soul floating around, then that must be what the Christian life is all about.

It explains why some were visiting prostitutes while others, even though married, were rejecting sex altogether. After all if there is no bodily resurrection it suggests, doesn't it, that you can do what you want with your body or that your body is a useless encumbrance that should be despised.

It explains why some in the church were trying to blur the distinction between men and women – after all if the future has no bodies such distinctions must be irrelevant to the truly spiritual person.

In the church at Corinth, as in so many churches since, the root of the problems in their behaviour was that they had their thinking, their doctrine, their beliefs wrong.

We might think that our precise beliefs about the nature of the resurrection that Christians will experience is perhaps a bit esoteric, a bit irrelevant even. But in this church getting it wrong had ruined vast sections of their church life.

If we are going to function properly as Christians we need a proper hope – a hope for the future shaped not by our imaginations but by what God says about the future.

And that is what we find in these verses that we'll look at in three sections.

1 We shouldn't be surprised by a resurrection body (v35-44)

If you were here last Sunday you'll know that Paul has already spent the first half of chapter 15 arguing for the central importance of the resurrection, both the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of all Christians, to the Christian faith.

But despite the fact that he has clearly shown that this is a non-negotiable belief for Christians it seems Paul knew the Corinthians well enough to know that there would still be some who would not believe him.

And so in v35 he counters the kind of objections they might make:

"How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?"

It's pretty likely that the Corinthians had taken on board quite a lot of ideas from the surrounding culture about the nature of human beings. Lots of Greek thinkers of the time thought that the flesh, our physical body, was nothing more than a corrupt tent, an unfortunate addition to being human. True liberation, the kind of thing enlightened people should be seeking, was to be found when only the pure spirit of soul of a man or woman would continue into eternity.

You can see why that kind of thinking might give some people in the Corinthian church a distorted idea of what "the resurrection of the body" meant. What kind of body, they might say, probably with a sneer, would arise from a heap of decomposed rubbish in the ground?

Paul thinks that such thinking is "foolish." It's important for us to see that he's not simply insulting them, Saying "how foolish" isn't the same as us saying "you Muppet." The foolish person, in the Bible, is always the person who has left God out of the picture. The one who is ignoring God in their thoughts or actions.

Of course any idea that our bodies will be raised with bits of skin hanging from white bleached bones is stupid. We don't need to worry about who will get a kidney if someone has been an organ donor or what will happen if someone has been cremated. Trying to think about the resurrection like that is stupid because it ignores the way God works in the world.

A way you can see, Paul says, simply by looking around you. What you sow, v36, doesn't come to life unless it dies. In other words God has written a principle of death and resurrection into nature for us to see.

When you sow, v37 there, you don't plant the whole plant just as it will be. No you plant a dry, dead looking little piece of wooden stuff we call a seed. But God turns that seed, through germination into a plant.

Now we know that the seed doesn't die as such – but the effect is the same. The seed has to cease to be in the form it was, it has to disappear in order to produce the plant.

Two different types of seed may look almost the same – but the plants that result may be wildly different, because to each seed God gives its own kind of body, v38.

What Paul I getting at there is that between the thing that goes into the ground – a "dead" seed or a "dead" Christian and it's resurrection form – a plant or a resurrected believer, there is both continuity (the seed produces the same type of plant, the resurrected Christian is the same person) and discontinuity – they are fundamentally different.

Or, Paul says, think about the natural world more broadly, v39. There are all sorts of different sorts of body - men have one kind of body, land animals of different sorts have different bodies - scaly bodies, furry bodies, hairy bodies. Fish are different yet again. A cod doesn't look like an elephant or a man like a lizard (well most men don't...). There are heavenly bodies celestial bodies like the sun, moon and stars. They are all different not only in the material they are made up of but also in their glory and splendour (v41). Some stars are brighter than others, the sun brighter than the moon, some have glorious colour, others shine with a pure whiteness.

Paul's point here is that each sort of body is perfectly adapted to its environment. Fish are adapted to water. To say a fish has a useless body because it wouldn't cope in the Sahara is stupid. Likewise if the moon were totally submerged in sufficient water it wouldn't reflect light very well. But it isn't. So it's not a problem. God gives things bodies that are appropriate to their environment. And, v42, that's how it is with the resurrection of the body.

The body we have at the moment is perfectly adequate for the life we have here. It is appropriate to our environment. A world where, though we bear the image of God, we are enslaved to decay and are eventually destined to pass away. The bodies that we have are appropriate to and designed for this world. There will be continuity with this world in eternity – it will still be us.

But as well as continuity there will also be transformation. And that should not surprise us – because the death, transformation and resurrection principle is something we see all the time in the world around us.

Paul is using illustrations from creation to show that his doctrine of the resurrection of the body doesn't mean our smelly rotting corpses will be pulled from the ground by some heavenly grave robber. No. Our bodies will be transformed. V42b-44:

The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised 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.

The Corinthians Christians had become obsessed with glory, power and spirituality now. And so often we are the same. I am the same. We want a God who offers us quick fix solutions to life's problems. We want God to endorse our debt so we can buy what we want today. We want instant healing. We want guidance for all sorts of issues in this life that, frankly, God isn't hugely bothered about.

And we live lives that are wrongly focussed and inevitably frustrated. Because it is our lot, now, to be weak, dishonourable, perishable and natural. Our very bodies tell us that. They flop and sag and go wrong and cause us pain. Well mine does – maybe you are all built like Greek gods!

But the great news of the gospel is that we don't have to be despairing because of that. If we trust in Jesus we will be raised imperishable, raised in glory, raised in power, raised with spiritual bodies. They will be just as real, in fact in a way more real, than our current bodies. But they won't go wrong. They won't ache, our bones won't break, the chemicals in our brains will never go out of balance. We won't get tumours, or clots, or motor neurone disease, or MS, or Parkinson's.

If you are a Christian here this morning your body is a bit like a seed. It contains the essence of what you will be at the resurrection; but you will be transformed into something immeasurably better. So the fact that our dead bodies will rot and decompose is not an obstacle to the resurrection. In fact it prepares us for the thought that the body that will be raised on that day, our new body, is much more wonderful than the body that we have now.

We should not be surprised by the possibility of a resurrection body.

2 Jesus guarantees a resurrection body (v45-49)

And it's not just living in God's world that should have helped the Corinthians understand the idea of a resurrection body.

The very fact that they are Christians should also help them to see what will happen.

Because our current bodies and our resurrection bodies are actually modelled on the bodies of two of the most important people in the Bible: Adam and Jesus.

Adam was genuinely alive. He became, v45, a living being. God breathed real life into Adam's nostrils. But Adam was also, v47, made out of the dust of the earth. He was, v48, of the earth.

Jesus, by contrast is the second man, the last Adam. He is, v47, of (not from) heaven. Jesus is the giver of eternal life.

So the question for the Corinthians is: who are they like? Are they like Adam or are they like Jesus?

And the right answer to that question, of course, is that they are like both. And their expectations of life, our expectations of life, need to be shaped by understanding both Adam and Jesus.

Physically we are like Adam. We are made of the dust of the earth. And we are all like Adam after his rebellion – we are born into a world of death and decay. We are dust – and to dust we will return. And despite the best efforts of all sorts of at best overenthusiastic Christians to demonstrate otherwise over the years the fact remains that weakness, dishonour and death and the universal experience of Christian people.

But there is another man as well. A man of heaven. A man who, through his death and resurrection, guarantees a resurrection body to all who put their trust in him. All Christian people are linked with Jesus. V48 "as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven." And so all Christian people will be like Jesus: V49 we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. When we became a Christian we became like Jesus.

Even though throughout this life we will also still bear the flesh of Adam, carrying around in us death and decay, one day we will be liberated for a new body like that of Jesus Christ. And it will happen because of what Jesus has done – he guarantees our future resurrection body.

And it's not just that we'll be given a resurrection body as a kind of added bonus.

3 A new world requires a resurrection body (v50-58)

I sent off for a new mobile phone this week because I discovered I was being ripped off on

the cost of my last one. It was from one of these internet companies – so I hope it actually turns up! Anyway with this deal not only do you get an actually phone "free" but you also get a portable hands-free kit, a leather carry case, in-car adaptor and in-car holder, clock, extra £10 cash, double minutes for 6 months, free online itemised billing, 9 months free line rental. And it might be tempting to think of the resurrection body as a bit like an in-car charger – a kind of nice free extra that God gives to us when we take out an eternity contract with him.

But that's not what the resurrection body is like. It's actually completely essential. An indispensable necessity for being part of God's kingdom. Because the bodies we have now would be totally inadequate for the new earth that God will create.

Look at v50. I declare to you brothers, he says, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Think about it like this. Being in God's completed kingdom, in the new earth, clothed in the bodies we have here this morning would be a bit like heading into a highly radioactive environment in a smart work suit or attempting an Antarctic trek in a T-shirt and shorts. It's not that you'd be a bit warm in the one case and a bit cold in the other. You would simply be destroyed - the clothes would not be suitable for the environment.

We will need a new body for the new world that Christ has won for us. And it is only when that happens that we will finally be able to say, v55, "Death is swallowed up in victory."

I was talking to a friend on the phone the other day. A friend who's Dad has died this year, in his early 60s, of a particularly nasty cancer and whose father-in-law died two weeks ago of pneumonia, accentuated by dementia. Both incredibly distressing experiences. And he was saying that the minister at his church had been preaching on this passage on Easter Sunday and that it had been very hard for him to listen to.

And he's right isn't he? When we hear at a funeral "Where, O death, is your victory?" it feels like the answer is obvious doesn't it?

Death's victory is right here in front of us lying in a wooden box. A person, a loved, a husband or wife, son or daughter, friend or colleague. There is death's victory. In every coffin. Of course, if we are Christian, and if the person we bury is Christian we know there is a resurrection at the last day. We know that Christ, v57, gives us victory.

But death is still hard. I had a panic attack recently. I imagine quite a lot of people here have experienced that. Let me tell you that it is horrible. You really think you are going to die. Your vision goes, your arms and legs go tingle and go numb, your heart races and you just can't get enough breath. We rightly fear pain and suffering in death. The Christian should be afraid of the process of dying because most death is horrible – as the many here who work in healthcare will know only too well.

But on that day, when Jesus returns, raises the dead and transforms those who are still alive at his coming then we will taunt death wholeheartedly. With our perfect indestructible bodies we will laugh at death and realise that his sting is drawn and his victory is hollow.

We can know and rejoice in that now. And we should. But we must realise that these words will only finally be fulfilled then. When we giggle in death's face because he has no power any more.

That victory come, of course, only through the Lord Jesus. The sting of death is not the pain of dying – we all need to face that. The sting of death is sin. The fact that we face God's judgment of death for our wickedness.

And Jesus has drawn that sting. He has embraced it for himself and taken God's judgment so that we can escape it.

But why does any of this matter?

Why is it important what our resurrection bodies will be like?

Why is it important that we look forward to an eternity when we will continue to be who we are but will be radically transformed inside and out by the power of God?

Well the simple truth is, and it was amply demonstrated in the church at Corinth, that without that hope, without that goal, without that destiny clear in our minds and hearts our Christian living will be weak and insipid.

Only unimaginable glory to come, the prospect of the earth recreated, only knowing the very presence of God himself, only the glory of imperishable eternal bodies without pain, illness, exhaustion, weariness, sadness or suffering, only that will enable us to be the people God wants us to be today.

Paul himself spells this implication out in v58. If there is no resurrection of the dead our labour is in vain.

But there is a resurrection – so we can work for the Lord knowing that it is not in vain.

We do not need to despise physical things – because our eternity will be physical.

And we do not need to worship them either because God will give us everything we need for a perfect physical existence forever.

This is not a passage that is just for funerals. It is a passage for today because it is a passage about the Christian life. About the transforming power of the hope of eternity. A hope that gives us the right perspective on all that happens now.

- If you are a doctor or a nurse this is a hope that helps you deal with the fact that all your patients will die.

- If you are a student this is a hope that helps you deal with the fact that you may never get married.

- If you are a leader in our church this is a hope that helps you deal with the fact that God's family will always be imperfect this side of Jesus' return.

Because the fact of the resurrection means that although in this life many of our hopes, aspirations and dreams may be frustrated in the end we will have everything.

Not in some dull, cloud floating, harp playing, pink fluffy, disembodied paradise. But in a real, physical, perfect, bodily, eating, drinking, walking, relating, singing, talking, being with God world.

That is our message – the Christian gospel. Eternity for all who trust Jesus. And there is no work we can do for that message that will ever be wasted.

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