

St Botolph's Church Worthing
Evensong, Easter Day
1 Corinthians 15: 1-19
Father Roger Walker

Probably the hardest thing for people to accept about the Christian faith is the Resurrection of Jesus, which we celebrate today. This is not just a modern-day problem: St Paul had to emphasise the centrality of the resurrection to the Church in Corinth, where there were those who found it difficult to believe. He is quite clearly writing in 1 Corinthians to the Church about various issues that have arisen there after He left them to go to Ephesus. So we read about divisions in the Church ^(chapter 3), immorality ^(chapter 5), lawsuits ^(chapter 6), Christian marriage ^(chapter 7), food sacrificed in idol temples ^(chapter 8), the rights of apostles ^(chapter 9), how to conduct worship ^(chapter 10) and finally the Resurrection ^(chapter 15) – the Corinthians certainly were not Paul's easiest congregation. But their failings do give us a lot of practical Christian instruction and teaching, and emphasise – as perhaps nowhere else in the New Testament – the absolute centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

What Paul wrote to the Corinthians is still absolutely true for us today: 'if Christ has not been raised' wrote Paul, 'our preaching is useless and so is your faith'. He reiterates this in three different ways and ends with some very salutary words for us – 'if for this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied'. These words reflect the attitude that we often come across: that you are a good Christian if you lead a moral, caring life. How many times have I heard variations on the theme of 'he never went to church, but he was a good Christian'.

Christianity is not just about the way we live our lives here on earth, important though that is. It is also about the faith that we hold – believing that Jesus was the Son of God, that he died on the cross to save us from our sin and rose again to open eternal life to us. This is the starting point for many who lead Christian lives and it brings us back to our closing words in the Reading. 'If for this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied'. So what does this say about us on this evening of Easter Day? It is first of all a call to faith: do we truly believe that Jesus is risen from the dead: are we confident of our own eternal life with god? These are basic central questions about our Christian faith. Can we answer to both with an unequivocal 'Yes'? I hope we can and yet doubt is a universal human emotion: our answers may be more along the lines of 'I think so'.

If this is so, how do we move to the kind of confident faith that St Paul expresses in his words? Part of us might say 'it was all right for him, he had a vision of the Risen Jesus and he had met people who had seen Jesus risen from the dead.' Yes he had, and he wrote it down for those who were not so blessed. If we have lingering doubts we need to say to ourselves 'can we believe what St Paul wrote – or was he a deluded charlatan? There is no middle ground between those two. St Paul is not the only person close to the events of the resurrection whose writings we have: Matthew and John were

there. They saw Jesus risen from the dead and wrote down what they remembered.

Mark may not have been one of the twelve apostles, but he knew them and an ancient credible tradition has it that he was Peter's interpreter. Luke, the other Gospel writer, is at pains to tell us that he has 'carefully investigated' everything. We have these contemporary voices recorded in the New Testament saying either, 'we were there' or 'we knew the people who were'. If the New Testament were the work of one person – like the Koran is completely written by Mohammed – we might have cause to doubt its veracity. But several voices all saying that Jesus rose from the dead must make us say this is something we can believe, even if we do not understand how it happened.

Having accepted that this is true, we can then make the same kind of logical progression from Jesus' resurrection to our own resurrection and Jesus Himself said in John 14 'in my Father's house there are many rooms. I am going there to prepare a place for you and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so that you may also be where I am'. St John was standing there when this was said, so once we have confidence in Jesus' resurrection we can have confidence in our own eternal life: we can let go of our doubts. The New Testament has too many authors from varying places for it to be a massive conspiracy to defraud, and central to it is Jesus' resurrection and our eternal life. This is what is central: the faith that we and billions of other Christians hold and have held, and this is what we have rejoiced at on this Easter Day.

AMEN

Father Roger Walker

27.3.16