

EASTER SERMON

If there is no resurrection

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. (1 Corinthians 15.20)

Frank Morrison published a book in 1930 entitled 'Who moved the stone? The author sets out to solve the mystery of the resurrection using a Sherlock Holmes approach. He examines the clues and considers the suspects one by one. Pilate, the priests and the soldiers are quickly eliminated. The stone is too large for the women to roll back leaving the disciples as the obvious candidates. They, however, are bewildered and dismiss the women's talk of resurrection. They even show hesitation in accepting the risen Christ when he comes and eats with them. Morrison concludes that the stone must have been moved supernaturally.

Resurrection proved? Not so! Our faith depends not on clever detective work regarding a stone but on the reality of the physical resurrection of Christ. This resurrection, insists Paul, is not just a spiritual appearance but a 'physical presence'.

Some members of the Corinthian Church would not accept this. Paul's statement seemed to conjure the ghoulish picture of a resuscitated corpse. Similarly the cultured academics in Athens, hearing the apostle's language, likened him to a 'parrot'. Today the American Bishop Shelby Spong thinks that the modern Christian should follow Paul's critics and reject resurrection nonsense. The Gospel writers, he argues, were using the ideas of their day to present Jesus as the portrait of the destiny available to all who follow in his Spirit. This message was dressed up by the Church in a series of miraculous stories about physical resuscitation. We should therefore, he says, cast off these stifling dogmas of the past.

I therefore have to ask, has Paul made things too complicated? I think not. He was struggling to express something which his detractors past and present failed to grasp namely that if there was no physical resurrection then Christianity would not survive. He spells this out in a series of statements (verses 14-19).

- No physical resurrection: then there would be no need to preach.
- No physical resurrection: then the Church is built on a lie and will not stand.
- No physical resurrection: then no mental, spiritual and physical liberation.
- No physical resurrection: then there is neither hope now nor life hereafter.

As I reflect on these statements I **first** affirm the connection Paul makes between resurrection and preaching. One of the constant complaints I receive is about the poor quality of preaching in Methodist churches. If this is true and if we take seriously what Paul is saying then Methodism will not experience resurrection. Poor preaching is ultimately a symptom of poor faith. Whenever in worship we replace proclamation with some other activity like asking congregational members to draw something, chat to their neighbours or contemplate a twig we are surrendering our souls to the spirit of the age. These may be useful exercises but not at

the expense of preaching. Churches blossom and grow in places where thoughtful Biblical preaching flourishes.

Second, I affirm that the Church is still here. Paul preached his resurrection message under the shadow of the Acropolis in Athens, the seat of ancient learning, wisdom and truth. There is certainly no denying that Greek culture, philosophy and learning have shaped the Western World but so too has Christianity. It is not a question of setting one over and against the other but of insisting that while ‘truth’ has an enduring quality so too has ‘sacrificial love’. This love (agape) as Paul makes clear in chapter 13, is not a sexual thing neither is it an illuminating spiritual experience, it is a physically active and transforming power which has the capability of transfiguring all human existence. While the ancient temples of the Acropolis crumbled, the resurrection gospel of liberating love was planting itself in a multitude of communal forms across the continents of the world. A physical resurrection, argues Paul, establishes the physical endurance of the Church and the total liberation of humankind.

Third, I affirm what Paul has to say about hope and the afterlife.

On the wall of the Columbo City Mission in Sri Lanka is a plaque celebrating the life of the Revd William Ault. He was a Wesleyan Methodist who, after effective ministries in England, was called to be a missionary in Batticaloa. The glowing eulogy tells of how even ‘the heathen revered him’ and loved him. It concludes ‘His missionary race was short. He died among the people of his charge in sure and certain hope on April 1st 1815, after labouring among them only eight months’.

He died on April Fool’s Day! Was he a fool? In the eyes of Paul’s critics, past and present, he certainly was. I do not believe so. If Paul had given way and dumbed down his message the Church would not be here now and you would not be reading this!

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ will all be made alive.

(Printed in the Methodist Recorder)