

Trinity 11

I take as my text today from St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians:

BRETHREN, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved....

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto thee, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.

Today's Epistle passage brings up several essential questions for us as Christians.

The first, we addressed briefly in last week's sermon, and that is: are we saved?

Second, what is it that saves us?

And third, what exactly is the **Resurrection**?

In the first question, are you saved? In looking at Paul's succinct answer, we may well conclude that our salvation is not completed in this world.

But then, what is it that saves us? Paul's answer is the **Good News**, the **Gospel of Jesus Christ**. It is the **Good News of a Risen Lord**. More to the point, not an invention of man, but received, delivered by Christ himself as he appeared to his Disciples, first to Peter and finally to James.

Moreover, it is the very function of the **Church** to be the repository of this **Good News**, the **Gospel**, and to deliver it to all the world. It is within the fellowship of the **Church** that we receive the **Gospel of the Risen Lord**.

This **Gospel of the Risen Lord** is the core of Christianity; it is the centerpiece of our **Doctrine**: the bodily Resurrection of our Saviour.

It might well be said that over the centuries, especially in more recent times, Christians in general have become somewhat lackadaisical about many of the basic doctrines of our Faith, notwithstanding to that which Scripture bears witness, that is to say, what is basic, what is absolutely necessary for salvation.

St. Paul, as he addresses the Church at Corinth, cites as a prime example the **Doctrine of the Resurrection**. While we might readily accept and believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, for many Christians the idea of a bodily resurrection had become muddled, as even so today.

This cavalier attitude toward the very basic, essential tenet of the **Christian Faith** may indicate that either we do not fully comprehend what the **Resurrection** means or that we may have confused **Resurrection** with the concept of **Immortality**.

In the 15th chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul addresses this doctrine in an effort to correct some misconceptions, misconceptions which parallel those of this time and age.

In Paul's era, the doctrine of the resurrection of the body was considered to be essentially a Jewish concept. In the Hellenistic world, especially so for most Greeks, the concept of a bodily resurrection was not only incredible but also absurd. Paul found this out when he made his address at the Areopagus in Athens.

As we surmise, the Athenians listened politely, attentively, to St. Paul until he mentioned the resurrection of the dead. Suddenly, his Greek audience was less than receptive to his revelations and, from that point on, it was rather a downhill slide.

Interestingly, the Greeks, renown as philosophers, thinkers, even as being religious, had fully accepted the concept of immortality but it was the concept of a bodily resurrection that proved to be the difficulty.

So, Paul, in a letter, addresses this issue with his predominately Greek congregation at Corinth. He begins his defense by reminding the Corinthians of the message he had first preached to them, which they had accepted: Christ's atoning death, his burial, and rising from the grave on the third day; moreover, he reminds them of Christ's appearances to many witnesses.

We can see in the passage from his Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul's restatement of the historical evidence of **Christ's Resurrection**.

He points out that the **Resurrection** is basic to the Gospel and that this fundamental message was common to all the apostles. Most likely the sources for his knowledge of the **Resurrection** were Peter and James. It is most probable that Paul received accounts of the risen Lord from the Apostles when he visited Jerusalem where he met specifically with Peter and James.

Paul himself had seen the Risen Lord that fateful day on the road to Damascus, a momentous event, not an accident, just as the **Resurrection** was not an accident but a momentous event in fulfillment of God's plan for the salvation of mankind.

This passage from the letter to the Corinthians is probably one of the oldest accounts of the resurrection appearances of our Lord. It was written about 25 years after the **Ascension** and is basically an introduction to the subject which Paul goes on to explore in the rest of the chapter.

Paul was quite distressed to learn that some of the converts at Corinth had become skeptical of the

Resurrection. He was confident that their disbelief was not in Christ's **Resurrection** but was a disbelief in the concept of a general resurrection of the dead, that is to say, that all of us would be subject to a bodily resurrection, not just Christ alone.

He feared that if their disbelief was not countered, it would lead eventually to a denial even of the **Resurrection of Jesus Christ**. Paul's work at Corinth would have been for naught and the problem could easily spread to other congregations in Greece, or, worse, erode the whole of Christianity.

So now, our third point, what is the **Resurrection**? Or better, what was Paul's concept of the **Resurrection**; and why was the **Resurrection Doctrine** so essential to the **Christian Faith**?

To better understand Paul's concept of the **Resurrection**, we should begin with the distinction between a natural body and a spiritual body. Each corresponds to the needs of the soul, first in the physical existence and then in the spiritual existence.

According to Paul, the soul is housed in a body suitable for this world, providing for its needs in the physical existence, fulfilling the requirements of thought, feeling, and so forth, in particular to be able to respond to God's love and Grace. Our fleshly body is perfectly adapted to the physical realm and provides an ideal abode for the soul.

When the body dies, however, the soul leaves it and another more suitable body must replace the earthly, physical body. The soul needs a suitable vehicle for self-expression in the spiritual realm to be able to embrace more fully God's love, a body that is adapted for a life of higher service, a heavenly body. Paul compared the process to a seed that, as it decays in the ground, gives birth to a new plant. So, the body, perishable as a seed, decays in the ground only to rise anew, incorruptible and glorious as a heavenly body.

For most Christians today, the ancient Greek concept of the immortality of the soul is well accepted; however, all-too-often, there is a failure to make the connection to the **Bodily Resurrection** that is essential to our **Christian Faith**.

Indeed, it is the resurrection of the body to which we ascribe in the Apostles Creed:

*I believe in the Holy Ghost: The Holy Catholic Church;
The Communion of Saints: The Forgiveness of Sins: The Resurrection of the body:
And the Life everlasting.*

What Paul and the early Church faced was the immortality of the soul on the one hand, corresponding with Greek philosophy; and on the other hand the resurrection of a material body, flesh and blood, which reflected the Jewish belief of a future life.

One foresaw a shadowy existence for an immortal soul, the other looked to a future life in material terms. For the Jew of the first century, the Greek doctrine of immortality provided nothing more than a soul devoid of personality. Craving the preservation of the entire human personality, the Jew could see only the possibility of a restored, *reanimated* human body

But, as St. Paul said, neither is the fruit of Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross.

Rather, in giving himself in obedience to the Father, Christ united us to himself. We, therefore, will be united with him in heaven. It is *His Bodily Resurrection* which assures us of our future bodily resurrection.

So, in the Christian concept of the *Bodily Resurrection*, we see the soul housed in a spiritual, recognizable body without the imperfections of our former earthly bodies, not devoid of personality, but able to enjoy the perfect beauty of that heavenly experience which God has prepared for us.

At Christ's **Advent**, the *Second Coming*, the purpose of the **Incarnation** will have been accomplished; the last enemy, death, having been conquered.

The first enemy is the devil, which Christ conquered on the Cross.

The second is sin which Christians are able to overcome through God's Grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The third enemy, the last, is death which will be conquered at the final resurrection.

So we see now more clearly that death, the final victory, is merely a passage from the physical to the spiritual, as it has often been said that we, made in God's Image, are both physical and spiritual beings with one foot in the physical world and one foot in the spiritual world.

I am reminded here of Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem *Crossing the Bar* and the last verse:

*For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.*

Thus, the great beauty of the **Doctrine of the Resurrection**, the **Good News**, the **Gospel of Jesus Christ**, the great beauty is that our earthly, perishable nature done away, our souls will be clothed with a new, heavenly body so that we can take possession of God's imperishable kingdom: the final triumph over Satan, sin and death, the triumph of God's **Eternal Love**.