

A Meditation on Resurrection

From the Epistle: I Corinthians xv. 1 ff.

1 Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; 2 By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. 3 For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; 4 And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: 5 And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: 6 After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. 7 After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. 8 And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. 11 Therefore whether it were I or they, so we preach, and so ye believed.

Today's Epistle is a passage that commences one of the most ringing declarations of the doctrine of the Resurrection, and it is upon this subject that I want to focus today. One might wonder about such a choice, since such considerations are normally reserved for the Easter season. But there is never a time when revisiting the promise of resurrection cannot help but revive our faith. To doubting Corinthian believers, the apostle puts it quite bluntly, in those verses in chapter 15 which just follow the Epistle selection:

12 Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: 14 And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. 15 Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. 16 For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: 17 And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. 18 Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. 19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

What are the distinct, life-giving advantages of apprehending this doctrine, and holding on to it with every bit of spiritual strength we possess? First, it establishes a perspective which enables us to come to terms with the nature of things here in this present life, and to live with them in victory, rather than subject to them. Secondly, it serves as a means of ordering our lives appropriately, because living in light of the resurrection will affect our priorities and influence our choices. Thirdly and most importantly, it will serve to form us into a worshiping community as we *look forward to the day of God and speed its coming* (2 Pe. 3:12).

I feel impelled to open the curtain on this great stage of the resurrection, because the world is striving so hard to force upon us continually its own blazingly bright theater of attractions. And if we are not on one hand fascinated and overcome with it, and tempted continually by its allurements, then we are pressed into discouragement and inactivity by its power, self-confidence, and utter disregard for the eternal implications of anything acted out within it. We must keep *that blessed hope* (Titus 2:13) in mind at all times: in the midst of political change, fueled

as it is by unprecedented expenditures of money, hijacking the media in a desperate effort to give emptiness and even wickedness the appearance of content and nobility; when the music, laughter and celebration project scorn and criticism upon the sobriety and restraint of the believer; and even when the church trades distinctiveness and holiness for conformity to the world in an effort to accommodate.

Please note that that the resurrection is our point of attention today, not heaven, which is the sure destination of every faithful soul. Here is the reason: the resurrection is an event, a specific point in time. All who die before the occurrence of the general resurrection, when Christ returns in person, will exist in a blessed spiritual state, *present with the Lord* (2 Cor. 5:8). But at the resurrection, all souls which have departed this life will be united with resurrected bodies, those *which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord* (1 Thess. 4:15) will join them, all human history will reach its consummation, and the eternal *Kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ* (Rev. 11:15) will be inaugurated. Oh, how glorious is this topic, and how necessary to our faith in these times! While all others await the next event that someone, somewhere, will offer, whether a concert, or an election, or a football game, or a weekend party, the heart of the Christian safely and securely rests upon that grand Occasion upon which all else hinges. Faith alone provides him assurance of his hope, and so it is our faith that must be nurtured.

How, then, does the resurrection alter our perspective on this life, and assist us in keeping it in its proper place? Unbelief restricts the significance of all activity to its implications in the here and now. It results in a rush to fill life with every available possibility, as the end-point looms ever larger, with anything beyond it resting within the uncertain realm of sentimental concepts with no basis in the promises of Scripture. Even if the rush is devoted not to selfish ends but altruistic ones —the betterment of the world and man’s lot within it—the significance of one’s actions is always subject to *the shadow of death* (Ps. 23:4a), *the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations* (Is. 25:7). How do I know that my measure of accomplishment is accurate? What will be the rule? The prevailing philosophy and values of the time? A favorable, sympathetic biography written after my passing which I will never read? With whom does the verdict rest?

But hear St. Paul’s words to the Christian, offered later in this very same chapter:

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? ...Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord. (vv. 55, 58)

What a world of opportunity has been opened to us... in small things, in big things, in all things, in the light of the resurrection! Certainty replaces uncertainty regarding the significance of all our activity within this sphere.

How will my life be reordered as I turn my eyes toward that anticipated moment? Understanding that the ultimate assessment of my life will be accomplished before the throne of God, I

find myself liberated to pour everything into pleasing Him, before whom I must appear, together with all of you, on that Day. Far from removing from me any concern for the needs of this hurting world, and the urgency of working to meet them, dimension is added to all my labors. I have in possession the likelihood of seeing their consequence not only now, but in eternity, when their ultimate significance will be clear. This is a double benefit to which those without faith have no access. Realizing this sets me free from seeking the heights of glory as the only way to grant myself some sense of legitimacy. Death is no “period”; it is a “full colon”, with everything to come.

Lastly, how is the Church transformed by being willing to live as a people who are “in waiting”? Faith suffuses them. It characterizes them, and marks them distinctively. Their pace is measured and confident. They are trying to replace the ever-accelerating anxiety of the world around them with the assurance that God’s Word is establishing within them. As they grow stronger, they are less affected by the dictates of a culture which demands their attention and involvement in a host of things, some of them perhaps even needful, but still a distraction to that higher goal to which they are appointed. Surely as the Church at large looks upon its single, glorious end, what have in essence been the parallel paths its many divisions have been proceeding along will converge until they are truly one.

In today’s Epistle, St. Paul begins to present the evidences of an occurrence in history never before witnessed — the resurrection of Christ— which is the precursor to another one that is the destiny of every Christian: the general resurrection. These words were written to the Corinthian church, caught up in the trap of intellectualism and doubt. Some among them fancied themselves too learned and rational to accept the improbability of a Savior risen from the dead. Surely this must have created no small amount of despair and hopelessness among them. The apostle wanted to replace both the pride and the fear with the unimpeachably sound evidence at his disposal. Near the very end of this chapter, one can practically hear him shout triumphantly: *Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ* (vs. 57).

Victory! Victory over a world that puts upon the Church the label of irrelevance, of maintainers of outdated and oppressive traditions. Victory over the compulsion to make a mark, to build monuments to ourselves, to leave a plaque of commemoration, or a skyscraper or tower with our name at the base. Victory over all that calls the person of faith a fool for stepping out of that race which so many others have entered and are entrapped in. And finally, victory over *death* and the *grave*.

We need help in establishing and keeping this focus. Our comfort and material satisfaction work against it. Only the Church and Holy Scripture support us. But that is enough.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.