**The Bigger Picture. February 13 2022 1 Corinthians 15:11-20**

One of my favourite phrases in the Uniting in Worship Funeral Service is “**we come to affirm the Christian conviction that while death is the end of human life, it marks a new beginning in our relationship with God”.**

It comes right at the start of the funeral service and it rightly sets the funeral into the bigger picture of God’s activity with us in this world and beyond our death.

It reminds me that even as we farewell this person and grieve for their physical absence from our daily lives, they now share in a different way in the kingdom of God, and in time, we too will share in that same way in God’s kingdom. It reminds us that together we are part of the bigger picture of God’s kingdom. Followers of Jesus are citizens of two kingdoms, the place (or kingdom) in which we live and God’s kingdom in which we also live. We “live consciously between the resurrection of Jesus in the past and the making of God’s new world in the future.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In generations gone by the church wrote, talked and sang about God’s new world, the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of believers. Yet now, these subjects seem to have largely dropped from our conversations, our preaching and song writing. Is it because of intellectual pride (arrogance), is there a belief that such concepts should be relegated to folklore of a bygone era, that they are not consistent with an enlightened mind, that scientific discoveries have superseded such concepts, that they should be heard purely metaphorically? There has certainly been a tendency to spiritualise life after death.

It seems that we tend to gravitate to the things that we can understand in intricate detail and avoid or ignore those things which “blow our minds" which defy logic, encompass mystery and require the exercise of our faith in God.

We know that issues like the second coming of Christ have triggered heated debates in years gone by, as people sought to come up with definitive and detailed explanations regarding how this would occur. Yet now it seems to have been consigned it to the “too hard” basket and avoided it in our discussions in the church.

Tom Wright has said that a belief in the resurrection requires love. It does not flow out of scientific inquiry or historical research, it involves faith, it is based in relationship with God and flows out of love for God.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is based on the big story of what God has done for us in Jesus, that Jesus died and thereby dealt with the sin of the world and that he was vindicated as the Messiah through his resurrection and could offer them transformation and newness of life.

Over time we have all developed our own understandings of death and life after death. We have been influenced by our families and their ideas, our cultures and their practices and affirmations, and as followers of Jesus we have been exposed to the teachings of Scripture. Sadly much of what is often perceived by Christians regarding death and life after death, may not be consistent with what we read in Scripture or see in the creedal statements of the church.

The passage which we have heard today challenges us to examine our ideas. Some of the people in the Corinthian church had developed some ideas that were causing Paul concern. It appears that in coming to faith in Christ they had accepted the resurrection of Jesus and this was a strong foundation of their faith in God. They understood that the resurrection was at the core of the gospel. However, they seem to have really struggled with accepting the thought of there being a time after death, when they would be raised to life. Paul encourages them to explore their understandings of the resurrection of their bodies in the light of the resurrection of Jesus. In an incredibly methodical manner, he builds up a case that their faith in Christ is compromised if they do not accept the reality of Jesus resurrection and their future resurrection. Paul uses very stark language as he does this.

The passage stresses the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus to all that the Christian church believes. Paul emphasises that if this were not true then those who have been sharing the gospel with the readers have been “misrepresenting God”. This would result in the fact that they and all those who have gone before them as followers of Jesus, would have developed a faith in Christ which was empty, useless, deluded, futile. If Christ had not been raised from the dead this was more than just an erroneous idea, it meant that their faith was powerless and therefore they would not have experienced God’s salvation.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Paul sees himself and the churches he has pioneered as part of the bigger picture of God’s rule, God’s kingdom. So he states, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied”.[[4]](#footnote-4) The beginnings of the Christian faith came about through the resurrection. It made sense of all that had happened to Jesus, and it reignited the fire of enthusiasm in Jesus followers. It remains a central pillar of Christian belief, hence at the conclusion of our funeral services there is a declaration of our confidence in committing our loved one to the care of God, “In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life”.

This letter to the Corinthians is a very practical letter firmly grounded in the Corinthian’s current circumstances. To devote a chapter of this book to the concepts of the resurrection of Christ, the resurrection of our bodies, the form of resurrection bodies and how this all fits with understandings of the kingdom of God, points to the fact that Paul saw this also as of practical significance to the church. In this era death was far more readily embraced as a part of life. Now we often hide death away and conversation regarding life after death is rare. The early church was refining their understandings of death in the light of Jesus’ resurrection and in the light of his inaugurating the kingdom of God here on earth.

Over the past two years we have been confronted by the fragility of life. So many people throughout our world have died from COVID. As we are exposed to a growing awareness of the reality of our own mortality, our underlying ideas and beliefs about death and life after death may come to the forefront of our minds.

Some people particularly, may struggle with the issues we have spoken of today. We are all unique and loved by God, as we are and as we may become. God is big enough to cope with our questions, concerns and uncertainties. My concern today is that we engage with these facets of our faith, that we grapple and keep on grappling with them, that we don’t just ignore them.

In our digital age, our wider community has easy access to online content about these subjects, much of it from Christian groups. Sadly however, some of this content does not seem to be based on a strong understanding of the big story of faith in Jesus derived from the whole of scripture. Rather sometimes groups take certain sections and give them great prominence over others. The challenge for us is that we may find ourselves as believers called on to help others make sense of what they have read. It is important that we have grappled with these issues for ourselves.

God calls us into a bigger picture, a new picture, an astounding picture. We are called even now to share in God’s kingdom here on earth and in the future to experience God unveiling of “the new heavens and the new earth”.

 As John says in Revelation “Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,”[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+21&version=NIV#fen-NIV-31055a)] for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+21&version=NIV#fen-NIV-31058b)] or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!””[[5]](#footnote-5)

Can our minds expand to embrace the bigger picture?

1. N. T. Wright, Surprised by Hope, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007) 224 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. N. T. Wright, Surprised by Hope, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007) ^^^^^^ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. J. Paul Sampley, “1 Corinthians: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck et al. (Eds) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,*(Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2002) 983-984 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 1 Corinthians 15:19 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Revelation 21:1-5 NIV [↑](#footnote-ref-5)