

May 24, 2020

1 Corinthians

15:1-26, 51-58

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Book of Corinthians is believed to have been written by the Apostle Paul, probably during his stay in Ephesus, (53–57 ce) after his initial 18 month sojourn in Corinth (around 50 ce). Paul seems to have written this letter of pastoral advice after he received disconcerting news of the community in Corinth regarding jealousies, rivalry, and immoral behavior. In today's selection Paul talks of what is essential: resurrection. In the Roman Empire there was belief in what we call "A Roman Imperial Eschatology" Meaning that providence had ordained and made it that the Romans ruled the known world and were led by Emperor Augustus. His reign was the fulfillment of a divine plan and prophecies, a new age inaugurated in him. This salvation through the emperor, who was then worshipped as a god, amounted to the present blessings of safety, health and wealth. Those who benefited from Roman rule (the haves, elites and right families) did so by divine will come into the world through the reign of Caesar.

Paul, in contrast associated salvation not with the coming of Caesar, but with the coming and the return of Christ. It's in the resurrection of Jesus that a new age has begun, and the world has already changed even if this transformation is not yet complete. Recently found archaeological evidence suggests that in the first century of the common era, the whole of downtown Corinth was gradually realigned architecturally to form a huge, composite, splendid monument to the imperial family, with an altar to Julius Caesar in the center. (Ben Witherington III, *Community and Conflict in Corinth*. p. 297)

ONE UNTIMELY BORN | the word here is strong and can be translated as "abortion" or "miscarriage." 'It could be that it was a term of scorn used by his enemies behind his back. It might suggest that Paul was disfigured or odd in appearance. It has often been taken to mean that he was rushed into apostleship, in an untimely haste, which might be the nuance here. One day he was persecuting the church of God, and seemingly in no time had done a complete about-face and was an apostle.' (Ben Witherington III, *Community and Conflict in Corinth*. p. 300)

some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead | Paul in his argument shows that he's responding to a population of the Church in Corinth that doesn't believe there is a resurrection. This would be common among Greek-Roman thinkers who believed in the immortality of the soul, but the temporality of the body. They thought of everything physical as less than everything that is spiritual. It could be a disbelief in resurrection of the whole person, or it could be an accommodation of cultural values and mores that impeded them from seeing what Paul wants them to see.

¹ Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ² through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to ONE UNTIMELY BORN, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unfit 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 toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

¹² Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can *some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead*? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are

not raised, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷ If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised FROM the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. ²¹ For since **death came through a human being**, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; ²² for as **all die in Adam**, so all will be made alive in Christ. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

⁵¹ Listen, I will tell you a MYSTERY! *We will not all die, but we will all be changed*, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and **this mortal body must put on immortality**. ⁵⁴ When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ *“Where, O death, is your victory?*

Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord *your labor is not in vain*.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- What part of today's texts grab you?
- How do you struggle with the notion of resurrection?
- If we are new creations, living in a new age begun in Jesus, how does that change the way we live?; understand history?; understand our place in social structures?
- Paul says that we are already resurrected in Christ through faith, yet it's not yet complete. How do you experience resurrection life as an “already”? and how do you experience it as a “not yet”?

FROM the dead | it could also be translated “out of” the dead. It's not merely a spiritual matter, or an appearance, but a bodily matter.

death came through a human being, ... all die in Adam | “Paul treats Adam as an historical person who was responsible for death entering the human world (compare it to what he says in Romans 5:12-21). But another Adam brought the resurrection of the dead. Just as all were affected by the action of the first, so also all those who are ‘in Christ’ will be brought to life, being affected by the action of the second.” (Ben Witherington III, *Community and Conflict in Corinth*. p. 304)

MYSTERY | *mysterion* (the root of the English term, “mystery”) – mystery. In the Bible, a “mystery” is not something unknowable. Rather, it is what can only be known through revelation, i.e. because God reveals it.

We will not all die, but we will all be changed, | is Paul saying that this change happens only to those still living when Jesus returns?; or does it also happen to those who have died?

this mortal body must put on immortality

Paul uses the metaphor of putting on clothes, getting dressed, to describe this transformation.

Vs. 54-55 is a combination of Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14. Paul doesn't see death as the natural conclusion to human life, but rather as an enemy, the last one that must be overcome.

your labor is not in vain | Paul concludes his argument with the same way he started it... “hold firmly to the message of salvation— unless you have come to believe in vain.” Verses 1-2 Look to the resurrection of Jesus for how you understand history and social structures. Don't look to Caesar and the imperial propaganda which is self-serving and materialist.