

Our God Reigns  
1 Cor 15:20-28  
*Tim Anderson 2/5/21*

Last week we looked at what isn't true.

If the resurrection is not true, then what follows from that?

We looked at 7 things, and they were all pretty depressing.

Our preaching is useless, our faith is useless,

we are still in our sins and more to be pitied than all people.

Depressing stuff.

But it's not true.

What is true then?

Well that's where we get to today.

15:20 "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead,  
the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."

It's great news.

Not just for Jesus but also for us.

We need to examine two words.

"Firstfruits" and "asleep".

Jesus is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

If you go back into your Old Testament,

into the book of Leviticus,

in chapter 23, God's people, Israel, are given instructions  
about their offerings to the Lord.

At harvest time, they are to bring the first sheaf of grain of their harvest,  
and give it to the Lord.

It's a way of saying,

"This harvest is God's blessing to me.

And I acknowledge that by giving God the first little bit.

I'm giving God the firstfruits."

The message of the first fruits is

that there is a whole lot more where that came from.

This is the first sheaf of the harvest,  
but in a couple of months,  
the barn will be full of sheaves.  
And in that sense, Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection.  
His resurrection is the first of a great multitude to be resurrected.

Now a contrary person might quibble at this point.

Jesus' resurrection wasn't the first.

There was the widow of Nain's son,  
there was the centurion's daughter,  
there was Lazarus.

In fact if you go back into the Old Testament,  
there was the Shunamite woman's son,  
the widow of Zarephath's son.

Jesus resurrection wasn't first.

But Yes it was.

Jesus' resurrection was first.

Because when we talk about resurrection,  
we are talking about more than breathing life back into a corpse.

All of those others who were raised  
were raised to die again.

They were dead,  
they were brought back to life again,  
and then some time later they died again.

The life they were brought back to was this life.

But when Jesus was resurrected,  
he was raised to the next life.

He was raised to our future hope.

He was raised to a life that appeared and disappeared at will.

And he was raised to a life that will never face death again.

So truly Jesus' resurrection was the first.

And it was the first of many.

His resurrection is the resurrection that you and I look forward to.

Jesus is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Why doesn't he say died?

Because death is permanent and our death is only temporary.

Paul is here following the example of the Lord Jesus.

Before Jesus raised the centurion's daughter,

he told the crowd, 'she's not dead but merely sleeping'.

And Jesus raised her to life with no more fanfare

than you might rouse a sleeping friend.

And Jesus' choice of words,

Paul's choice of words,

underlines to us that death is not to be feared.

It's something like taking a nap.

Often after church on Sundays,

I will go home, eat lunch and then lie down on the couch and have a nap.

And I do it without fear.

I do it with the confident expectation of waking up,

and hopefully doing so feeling refreshed.

But of course I can't be sure of waking up,

I might die in my sleep.

Well if I do,

that too is not to be feared.

I'm even more sure of waking up from that sleep.

The great American evangelist Dwight Moody said this,

“Someday you will read in the papers that Moody is dead.

Don't you believe a word of it.

At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now.

I was born of the flesh in 1837,

I was born of the spirit in 1855.

That which is born of the flesh may die.

That which is born of the Spirit shall live forever.”

Paul continues,  
15:21-22 "For since death came through a man,  
the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.  
For as in Adam all die,  
so in Christ all will be made alive."  
As you read this,  
you could be excused for mistaking this  
for part of the second half of Romans 5.  
That's the great exposition of bad things came through Adam,  
good things are coming through Christ.  
Check it out at home if it's not familiar to you.  
But here, this is Paul's explanation of the word firstfruits.  
Adam died, and he didn't just bring death to himself,  
he brought death to everyone who followed after him.  
This was the effects of original sin.  
Adam sinned.  
His sin brought death.  
And somehow, which we don't have the time to go into today,  
Adam's sin was more infectious than the most deadly pandemic,  
we all caught it and we all die.  
Adam was if you like, the firstfruits of death.  
His was the first tombstone in the cemetery,  
but following him there has been a great harvest of tombstones.  
And so it is with Christ.  
Christ was the first to be raised.  
But his resurrection is something  
that all those who are in Christ get caught up in.  
And his resurrection will make all who put their faith in him come to life.  
He is the firstfruits,  
and just as the cemetery is gradually filling up,  
so the new heavens and new earth  
will be full of those who are resurrected.

Now someone might object,  
I like your theory, but there's a glaring hole.  
I can see the cemetery gradually filling up.  
But to date,  
Christ is the only person who has been raised.  
There's no actual evidence that he is the firstfruits of a greater resurrection.  
Paul's answer to that is in verse 23.

"But each in turn:  
Christ the firstfruits,  
then when he comes,  
those who belong to him.  
Then the end will come ..."

We aren't going to see the rest of the harvest of the resurrection  
until Jesus returns.

But the last bit I read gives you Paul's perspective.

"Then the end will come".

When we are looking at Jesus' resurrection,  
we are looking at the beginning of the end of the world.

This world is going to be remade.

Evil will be removed.

And God will reign.

And the resurrection of Jesus is the first step in that process taking place.

It's just the first step.

But once it happens,

it sets in motion everything else that is in God's plans for the end.

When we look at the resurrection of Jesus,

we are looking at a sign of what is to come.

15:24 "Then the end will come,  
when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father  
after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power."  
There is much to be fearful of in the world we live in.

There's a growing willingness of China  
to behave with complete disdain  
for nations like ours that are smaller and weaker.  
There's the power wielded by social media giants  
who seem to have unprecedented access  
into what would once have been regarded our private information.  
There's a growing intrusiveness of governments  
to tell us what we can and can't believe or say.  
Frankly it's a scary world out there.  
Unless you fix your eyes on Jesus.  
He is going to destroy all dominion, authority and power.  
As Australians  
we complain about our government like it's a national sport.  
But if we look around the world and across history,  
we have it unbelievably good actually.  
How would you like to be in Burma,  
where the abuse of power stretches to killing doctors who treat patients  
that the ruling military strongmen take exception to?  
How would you like to be in Russia,  
where those who oppose Putin  
routinely seem to get mysteriously poisoned?  
How would you like to be in North Korea,  
where the abuse of authority is so bad,  
that the stories don't escape to the rest of the world.

In fact in our world,  
the only thing worse than leaders with unbridled power,  
is a complete breakdown of law and order.  
If no one exercises power,  
then society stops functioning altogether.  
It's what is called anarchy.  
Anarchy is a disaster.

Anarchy is Lord of the Flies stuff.  
But when Jesus destroys all dominion authority and power,  
there's no power vacuum.  
Authority is given over to God the Father.  
When we pray the Lord's Prayer,  
we pray 'your kingdom come'.  
God's kingdom is God's rule in action.  
And when God's kingdom finally arrives in completeness,  
there will be no other rulers.  
God alone will rule.  
When you think of how much of human life is about a struggle for power,  
it's hard to imagine our existence without that struggle for power.  
It's in every relationship.  
Who's in charge?  
Who makes the decisions?  
It's at your home unless you live alone.  
It's in your workplace, if you work.  
Even if it's very clear who the boss is,  
there's a competition to influence the boss  
to get them to act in certain ways.  
It's in the local council.  
Should the airport be allowed to have an expansion?  
Should Holy Trinity be allowed to build without asphaltting the car park?  
Does the Eastern side of the Peninsula  
get its fair share of spending and services?  
It's in the State Government.  
Should there be lockdowns?  
Is the safe schools program appropriate material for school kids?  
In every part of life,  
there's this struggle for power.  
Some people think one thing,  
other people disagree.

Who gets to have things their way?  
I find it hard to imagine a world  
where I don't need to try to influence things to get them my way.  
Trying to influence the world to get things your way is not all selfishness.  
I mean we start a community meal this week.  
That's a way of serving  
some of the less well off members of our community.  
But to start something like that,  
the people who have a passion to do that  
have to influence others to see the world their way.  
"I have this vision.  
Come and be part of my vision."  
Sandra and Robbie have worked really hard to do that.  
And you can't achieve much of value in this world  
without getting a group of people working together  
on some project or other.  
But in the kingdom of God,  
we won't need to do that.  
God will have a perfect vision for how things ought to be.  
And we will be able to trust his vision.  
We won't need to have our own little agendas.  
If that feels a little bit disempowering,  
then chances are  
you like me are a bit too attached to getting your own way.  
Better to think of it like a family holiday  
before you got old enough to argue with your parents  
about what activities would be the most fun.  
Parents know best.  
And wherever they take you is a special adventure.  
You don't have to worry about what the next day's adventure will be  
because you can trust your parents and it will be great.  
That's what God reigning over everything will be like.



But even better.

The process of God reigning doesn't happen all at once.

It starts with the resurrection of Jesus.

And the kingdom of God on earth grows in the church.

Every time someone puts their trust in the Lord Jesus.

Every time someone decides to love because Christ first loved them.

Every time someone is patient because God has been patient with them.

And God's kingdom reaches into every nation on earth.

And God defeats all his enemies.

15:26 "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

Death came into the world because of sin.

Jesus' death on the cross paid the price for sin.

So death must eventually be defeated.

That's how Paul knows we must be resurrected.

Sin has been paid for.

Death must eventually be destroyed.

And when it is destroyed,

Jesus reign will be complete.

And he will hand over the kingdom to his Father.

That bit about Jesus handing over the kingdom to the Father is the cause of a fair bit of confusion.

15:28 "When he has done this,  
then the Son himself will be made subject to him  
who put everything under him,  
so that God may be all in all."

To modern ears it sounds like it is saying  
that God the Son is not the equal of God the Father.

But each of the three persons of the trinity are equal.

Equal in power.

Equal in glory.

Equally God.

And yet here it says that the Son will be subject to the Father.

How can that be?

It's hard for us to conceive of it.

It's because our lives are filled with the struggle for power that I spoke about before.

In every relationship,

in every organisation we have this struggle to be the boss.

And so we can't conceive of a situation

where we would allow someone else to be the boss

without it indicating that they were more important than we are.

Who's the most important person in the company?

The CEO.

The most important person in the government?

The Prime Minister.

To some extent our lives have to be a struggle for power because there's the constant nagging question,

"If someone else has the power, am I going to get treated fairly?"

Or am I going to get walked all over

because they don't care about my interests?

But in the Trinity,

those questions don't exist.

The Son can completely trust the Father to rule perfectly.

The Son can trust the Father to govern entirely in the interests of the Son, entirely to do what is best for everyone all the time.

And so the Son can be subject to the Father without being less than the Father.

Now of course that isn't just telling us something about God's future kingdom.

God's kingdom is growing right now in the church.  
And so it's telling us something about our relationships.  
I said before that all relationships  
are going to be characterised by a struggle for power.  
That's true, we live in a fallen world.  
But we don't have to give in without a fight.  
We can struggle to make our relationships not a struggle.  
We can struggle to be subject to those in positions of authority.  
Even when our very being is crying out,  
"I want to do it my way!"  
We can struggle not to value people  
by what positions of authority they have.  
They are all made in God's image.  
That what makes them valuable.  
Not whether humans call them doctor or Rev or Prime Minister.

Well it's time to wind it up.  
Last week we looked at what happens if the resurrection isn't true.  
Disaster. Don't go there.  
This week we looked at what happens if the resurrection is true.  
The answer is, God reigns.  
If the resurrection is true  
then all of God's purposes for the world will come to pass,  
all of God's enemies will be defeated.  
When we look at the resurrection,  
we are looking at the victory of love.  
A future where there is no more struggle for power,  
because God reigns perfectly and unquestioned.  
And so we praise him for his victory!