

17 February 2019

1 Corinthians 15.12-20

If for this life only ...

A couple of years ago, just before Easter, the BBC commissioned a survey about attitudes in this country to the resurrection of Jesus and life after death.

The results were fascinating.

The survey covered just over 2000 people from the general population.

This is how they identified themselves in terms of their religious affiliation.

- 51% - Christian
- 3 % - Muslim
- 6% - Other
- 3% - Prefer not to say
- 37% - No religion

Overall – 60% identified themselves as religious, 40% as no religion or prefer not to say.

The survey also asked the Christians how regularly they attended church.

- 38% never
- 31% less than once a month
- 20 % weekly
- 11% 1-3 times a month

Roughly 30% are active Christians, 70% non-active Christians.

It is the question about life after death that I am interested in this morning.

In answer to the question, “Do you believe in life after death?” (*any* form of life after death)

- 46% - believe
- 46% - don't believe
- 8% - don't know

You might say that it is remarkable in our secular society that as many as 46% believe in life after death. But you could also observe that when 60% claim to have a religious faith, it is slightly odd that only 46% believe in life after death.

But the picture becomes even more mixed – and perhaps slightly more confusing.

Because when the replies are broken down between the different respondents we find that

- 21% of those who claimed to have no religion, believed in some form of life after death
- 31% of those who identified themselves as Christians did not believe in some form of life after death
- And 11% of active Christians said they did not and a further 4% of active Christians said they did not know.

And then a further question was asked, trying to find out how people thought about life after death.

Of those who said they believed in some form of life after death:

- 65% said that they believed in another life where your soul lives on
- 32% said they believed in some form of re-incarnation
- 3% held other views

And among those who identified themselves as Christians 26% of them said that they believed in some form of re-incarnation – and 16% of active Christians opted for this rather than some notion of heaven.

So what a mixed picture!

Nearly half of the people surveyed believe in some form of life after death, even though we are supposedly a highly secular country.

A fifth of people who claim to have no religion, still believe in some form of life after death. (Now, of course, just because people don't belong to a religion does not mean that they do not have some belief in some form of God.)

Nearly a third of those who identify themselves as Christian do not have any belief in life after death.

And a quarter of those who say they are Christian and believe in life after death, believe in some form of re-incarnation – which has never featured as any part of Christian teaching.

I find all of this quite fascinating. And it could well be that this mix of views is represented among us here.

I suspect that we could have a fascinating conversation about our different views of life beyond this life ... and I suspect that there would be some considerable convergences, where we found agreement ... but that there would also be some significant points of discussion among us, where we discovered that we had quite differing views.

And it is inevitable that we will have a range of views on this matter because we cannot get away from the fact that we are in the realms of speculation. We have no hard evidence on which to base our views.

We are like dragonfly larvae trapped in an underwater world, unable to leave our world to see the new horizons opened up by the transition from larva to dragonfly. We might have an innate instinct within telling us that there is something beyond, and calling us to reach for the beyond, but the water limits our horizons of experience and imagination. Dare we believe? And on what basis can we believe. After all, the dragonfly can no longer swim to come back and communicate with us.

Paul met an even more mixed up set of views and outlooks in the church in Corinth.

Corinth itself was a melting pot of all sorts of different religions ... and each of them would have had its own view on life beyond this life.

Actually, a good many of the religions of the time did not focus very heavily on life beyond death. The purpose of religions was very much about securing protection from the gods for this life – through offering the proper gifts and sacrifices to the gods. It was enough to navigate your way through this life, keeping on the side of the gods, without worrying about what might happen beyond death.

There was certainly some space for thinking that for a few significant people, there might be some kind of life beyond this life with the gods. Some of the

philosophies taught that there is an immortal bit trapped deep within us longing for union with God. The goal of life was to rise above the material world and find that union with God beyond this evil, material world. But it certainly wasn't a promise that was held out to all. It wasn't a part of the popular religion of the time.

So the Jews, with their belief that beyond this life, when God brought this world to its ultimate culmination, all would be raised from the dead to new life and judged by God – this was something of a religious oddity. And, in fact, it was a fairly recent addition to the Jewish religious mindset – only in the previous 200 to 300 years did it really take root. And not all Jews accepted this as part of their religion. The Sadducees believed that it was enough to be faithful to God in this life, and that God's blessing on his people was a blessing for this life ... and that is sufficient.

The Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead was grounded in the clash between their understanding of who they believed God to be and their experience of lived reality in this world. They believed that God is a righteous God, and that God is at work in the world through his people to put this world right. Yet their experience of life in this world was that their stand for God's righteousness kept on meeting resistance. Those who courageously stood on God's side were often at the mercy of the ruthless and the powerful of the world.

So, while they held on to the view that God continued to work for what is right and just in this world, they also believed that God has purposes beyond this world, for the transformation of this world in a new heaven and a new earth, in which those who suffered in their stand with God would be raised to a new life in which all suffering and mourning is ended ... and the upside down order of our world in which the evil and the unscrupulous too often come out on top, is once and for all put right.

And they used the language of resurrection, because they believed that the God who created this world out of nothing, who is the source of our life in this world, will, in a new act of creation bring new life to the dead.

Now, it seems that many of the Corinthian Christians had brought their previous thoughts about life beyond this life into their Christian faith. For them, it was an unnecessary piece of speculation. They wanted to concentrate on having an

intense relationship with God here and now, because they believed that this is what life is all about.

But Paul wants to encourage them to see that integral to the Christian faith is belief in the resurrection of the dead. God has plans and purposes for us in this life, but he also has plans and purposes for us that go beyond this life.

Paul's conclusion is that – "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."

Why? Because being faithful to Christ in this world does not always add up to an outwardly successful life. It means hardships and sacrifice. It means taking tough decisions to stay true to Jesus.

For Paul himself it had meant beatings and imprisonments; it had meant public ridicule and misunderstanding. Even within the church he was at times accused of being an imposter. His authority was forever being questioned and challenged.

Why go through all this, when life could be so much easier?

Paul says that we go through all of this, because in Jesus we know that we are part of something so much bigger ... we are part of the work of God that is about transforming this world here and now ... but which will be concluded in God's promise of a new heaven and a new earth.

But Paul's thinking about resurrection had been transformed by Jesus, because now his trust that God offers resurrection life beyond this life is based upon the belief that God has raised Jesus from the dead. It is now so much more than speculation for Paul.

We hold on to this promise of resurrection life because we are followers of Jesus who has already paved the way for us – who died and was raised from the dead by God.

It is highly likely that the Corinthian believers also wholeheartedly believed in the resurrection of Jesus. But they probably believed that this was just a one-off miracle performed by God because Jesus was a one-off person. They had no problem thinking that God would do something amazing like this for his Son.

But for Paul, the significance of Jesus' resurrection is the fact that what happened to Jesus is not in every respect a one-off. Paul calls it the 'first fruits' of what is on offer to all.

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

The sense in which Jesus' resurrection is a 'on-off', is only because it has taken place in the midst of the history of this world, whereas for the rest of us resurrection will take place beyond this present world of life and death.

For Paul, Jesus' resurrection makes no sense at all if resurrection is not the promised destiny of us all in God.

"If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised." (v 13)

So, if it is for this life only that we hope in God, then it amounts to little for us, argues Paul.

Paul wants to offer this promise from God – that is a promise within this life of transformation, hope, peace with God. He wants us to have a full life with God in the here and now.

But it is not only about this life. It is about life beyond life, when God will transform this world, and make this world new in his kingdom.

There is always something of a balancing act to be performed when we think about the balance between focussing on life in this world and life beyond this world with God.

I remember my mum having those old scales for doing cooking, where you put the weights on one side and the produce in a pan on the other, and you had to look for that sweet spot where the two sides balanced one another.

In our life with the risen Jesus we have to find that sweet spot between living with God to our fullest in the here and now, and holding our hope for life with God beyond this life.

If we decide that there is nothing beyond this life to live for, then we have to invest everything in this life. But then when trouble or hardship, pain or sorrow come along, all of that seems to threaten the meaning and value of this life.

And Paul himself was challenged by some of the Corinthian Christians because he suffered persecution and setbacks, which, for them, raised questions about his credibility.

But we can also tip the balance the wrong way, if we invest everything in our hope beyond this world, and ignore the needs and concerns of the present world.

But God calls us to live wholeheartedly with and for God within this world.

And so we need to hold onto the balance between living for God and working for his kingdom in this world, and holding onto the promise of God in which he promises a renewal of this world and of our lives in the new heaven and new earth of his kingdom in which we are raised to new life in him.

So in Christ we will want to be at one with the God who is at work in our world today bringing transformation and hope into this present world, because he is the God who loves this world.

But in Christ we will also want to hold onto our hope in the God who promises to make all things new, so that all of the turmoil, the suffering, the injustice of our world will be transformed in his glorious kingdom when God raises the dead – and where there will be no more mourning, or suffering, or pain, or injustice, or poverty.

If for this life only we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all.