

The Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 17:5-8
<i>Response</i>	...before the gods I sing thy praise...
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 1:1-2, 3, 4 and 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 6:17, 20-26

The sixth Sunday for Ordinary Time in year C continues our journey through 1 Corinthians 15 with a focus on the question of the resurrection of the body. So the reading for today is a little shorter than other readings have been from 1 Corinthians. It's chapter 15, verse 12, and then it skips down to verse 16-20. So this is what St. Paul says:

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

And then it skips down to verse 16:

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.¹

Several things to talk about here. First point... when Paul says:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead...

...he's alluding to the tradition that he's just mentioned earlier in chapter 15 — the Gospel, the Good News that he received and he handed onto the Corinthians — that Christ died, that He was buried, and that He rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. So what Paul is doing is he's starting from the foundational belief of the bodily resurrection of Jesus on the third day — which apparently, the Corinthians accept. They don't seem to have a problem with Christ's resurrection from the dead. They accept that that is being preached, that it's part of the apostolic tradition.

However, some of them are apparently saying there is no resurrection of the dead, meaning that they are denying the final resurrection of all of the rest of humanity on the last day. So this might seem a little strange, but we can understand it from a couple of perspectives.

First, remember that Paul is writing the letter to the Corinthians largely to people who are ex-pagans. So in the pagan world, there were many different views of the afterlife, of what happened after a person dies. Most of them — although you can't ever say any one thing about paganism, it's very diverse. Most of them tended to see death as the escape of the soul or the spirit from the body, a kind of liberation of the soul from the body. It was actually one ancient pagan Greek expression called *soma sema* — the body is a tomb. So it's a very negative view of the human body and if there were any view of salvation at all — although that's even stretching it. It's taking a Jewish term and applying it to a pagan mindset. It was in the fact that the soul and spirit would escape from the body.

So the Jewish, by contrast, the Jewish idea of a resurrected body of the soul or spirit being reunited with the body and that salvation consisted primarily in that reunification of soul and body so that the body and soul would live forever in a restored creation and a restored universe, like in Isaiah 26, Isaiah 64-66.

This was very foreign to the pagan worldview or pagan understandings of the afterlife. So although some people apparently could wrap their brains around the idea that Jesus was raised from the dead — He's divine, He's the Son of God, that

kind of thing — they were struggling with the idea that other human beings, that the rest of humanity, that the Church, that the Corinthians themselves would one day be raised from the dead. So they were denying that article of faith.

And so Paul responds to that doubt by arguing with them from Christ's resurrection to their own. And in this case, it's a little unfortunate — maybe a lot unfortunate — that the lectionary skips the intervening verses between 12 through 16, because that's where he makes that argument. So I'm going to revisit that just so you can see clearly how it flows. So the beginning when Paul says:

... how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

In verse 13, which isn't in the lectionary but is in 1 Corinthians, says this:

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. 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.

Alright, so pause there. So you see it's a little clear. The logic is a little clearer here in the intervening verses. He's saying if there's no resurrection of the dead — meaning of all the dead — then that means Christ hasn't been raised. And if Christ hasn't been raised, then your faith is in vain. And the Gospel isn't true.

So he's reasoning backward from the end of time to Easter Sunday in order to make the case for our own resurrection. And I think it's worth pausing to emphasize that you don't have to be a formerly pagan Corinthian to have doubts about our bodily resurrection at the end of time.

I've noticed over many years of teaching now that whereas students will often be very clear about the bodily resurrection of Jesus, when it comes to our own resurrection at the end of time, they often seem a bit more fuzzy. There's a tendency, especially in western Christianity, to reduce eternal life to the immortality of the soul and the Beatific Vision. And although it is certainly true

that in the New Testament, as well as in the Catholic tradition, the souls of the righteous who enter into Heaven, experience the salvation and joy of the Beatific Vision even as souls... even though they don't yet have their bodies.

But it's equally important to remember that also according to the New Testament and according to the Catholic tradition, the souls in Heaven who see God face to face now are still waiting for the reunification of their bodies and souls at the end of time in the final resurrection of the dead. This is one of the articles of faith in the Creed:

I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come.

There's still this outstanding resurrection that has to take place on the final day. That's what the Corinthians are struggling with and that's what Paul is using the bodily resurrection of Christ to argue in favor of, to kind of lead them logically step by step to the truth of their own resurrection. Because he says here — and this is where the lectionary picks up:

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised...

And here is the key:

... your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

So he's trying to help them see that when you deny one article of faith (like the resurrection of the dead at the end of time), it actually affects the other articles of faith, like the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

And sure enough, in my own experience over the years, whenever I meet students or I talk with people who don't believe in the bodily resurrection of the dead at the end of the time or they're weak on that, if you press into it, you'll often find that their understanding of Christ's resurrection is weak. They'll sometimes think of it as a kind of spiritual resurrection, or they won't be really clear on the corporeal nature of His resurrection... and vice versa. If you spiritualize the resurrection of

Christ on Easter Sunday, then you're going to end up... it's going to end up affecting the way you understand or conceptualize our resurrection at the end of time. So people will often just dispense with the idea of a bodily resurrection of all humanity at the end and talk about salvation in purely immaterial, spiritual terms, without any reference to the reunion of the body and the soul for all time in a new creation, in a new heavens and a new earth.

So this is a very important passage on eschatology. And what Paul is essentially saying here is that if you deny the article of faith in the resurrection of the dead, you end up denying the resurrection of Christ. And if you deny the resurrection of Christ, you actually undermine the faith itself, because you haven't been saved from your sins.

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

In other words, Christians who have already died, then they've perished ... which was a widespread pagan view, that once you die, it's over. It's just darkness, emptiness, and nothingness. You cease to exist.

That's not the Jewish view, and it's certainly not the Christian view. But it *is*, what Paul says, will be the case if the resurrection either of the dead or the resurrection of Christ is not true. So this is a powerful, powerful argument for the essential character, the essential nature of the truth of Christ's resurrection and our bodily resurrection at the end of time. Because as Paul says:

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.

There's a famous early 20th century Jesuit Biblical scholar, Fr. Ferdinand Prat — he was a French scholar. And he wrote a book on the theology of Paul, and he summed this up really well. He says what Paul is essentially saying is this:

If there is no resurrection, then Christianity is a lie.

Full stop. The whole thing is a lie. The whole thing is a sham. You can't be a Christian and have some doubts about the resurrection or deny the resurrection, either of Christ or at the end of time. It's all of a piece. Because the essence of the Good News, as Paul says earlier in the chapter, is not just that Christ died for our sins. It's not just that He was buried, that He on the third day rose again and appeared to many in His body.

So, once Paul finishes that rhetorical argument, he of course wants to end not with the error but with the truth — always a good idea. Don't just teach... don't just inform people about erroneous ideas, but tell them what the truth is. So he ends with the truth by saying:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

And here Paul uses an image that would have been familiar not just to Jews but also to pagans, which would be the first fruits of a harvest. So at harvest time, especially at harvest in the spring, there would be the first sheaves of grain, the first fruits that the Jews would cut down and they would offer to God in thanksgiving for the harvest. But then there would be future harvests as well — second and third and fourth fruits. So what Paul does here is he uses that analogy from the agricultural life from the first century AD as a way of illuminating the mystery of the resurrection.

So just like the first sheaf of grain is cut down and then offered to God in the temple as first fruits, and then eventually, there's going to be another harvest — this is actually what the Jews will do at Pentecost and Passover. Passover they cut the first sheaf of grain; they offer it as first fruits. And then Pentecost, they offer another offering of God — the offering of grain to God in celebration of harvest, seven weeks later. So too, Christ is like the first fruits of the resurrection, and then at the end of time, the rest of the harvest of souls is going to come in in the bodily resurrection of the rest of humanity.

So it shows that salvation is a process. It begins with Jesus on Easter Sunday, but it's not going to be complete until the last day. Just like the harvest begins with the

first sheaf of grain, but it doesn't come to fulfillment until the harvest and the celebration of Pentecost seven weeks later.

So a powerful, beautiful analogy there in which Christ's resurrection is the first fruits, and then our resurrection at the end of time is part of that final harvest of souls.

So in closing, I just want to end with a word from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the centrality of the resurrection. I realize that for many people, it might seem like this is obvious that the resurrection is important, but I still think it bears repeating just how essential it is. Because the resurrection of Jesus and our own resurrection at the end of time is an extraordinary mystery that transcends our ability to really comprehend what will it be like to have our bodies and souls reunited for all time in a new glorious state in which we will never die, never suffer, and never sin.

So it's a mystery, so it's always important for us to remember how important these mysteries are. And this is what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says about resurrection:

The Resurrection of Jesus *is the crowning truth of our faith in Christ*, a faith believed and lived as the central truth by the first Christian community; *handed on as fundamental by Tradition*; established by the documents of the New Testament; and preached as an essential part of the Paschal mystery along with the cross...

Now pause there. Could the *Catechism* be more clear here? It's crowning truth, it's fundamental, it's essential. There is no room for denying or doubting the resurrection of Christ. It is absolutely essential to the faith. He continues:

The mystery of Christ's resurrection is a real event, with manifestations that were historically verified, as the New Testament bears witness. *In about A.D. 56, St. Paul could already write to the Corinthians*: "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, that he was raised on

the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve ...” *The Apostle speaks here of the living tradition of the Resurrection which he had learned after his conversion at the gates of Damascus.*²

Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 638-639. So there we just the *Catechism* emphasizing — and we should emphasize it again — that if the resurrection of the dead is not true, then the resurrection of Christ is not true. And if the resurrection of Christ is not true, then Christianity is a lie, our faith is in vain, and we are fools. We are of all people to be most pitied... because everything we do and all that we’re celebrating and all that we’re teaching and preaching is ultimately ordered toward the Good News of the resurrection. Everything hangs on it.

And the Good News is precisely that Christ *has* been raised from the dead, and not just for His own sake. He wasn’t raised from the dead just to say, “Hey, look. I’m really the Messiah. I’m really the Son of God.” His resurrection isn’t just a vindication of who He claimed to be. It *is* that, but it’s also an anticipation of what God has in store for all of us and for all those who love Him.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 638-39