

Glimpses of a resurrected-life here and now

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Epiphany + 7C: Gen 45 3-11, 15, Ps 37 1-11, 40-41, 1 Cor 15 35-50, Lk 6 27-38

Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery. Today, we saw his gracious reunion with them. That story is a chilling reminder of just how bad sibling rivalry can get. Please think back to your childhood for a moment? If you had a brother or sister at home and your parents were out for a while, try to remember the way you greeted them when they got home. Was it always a scene of joyous, loving reunion? Or were you playing beautifully with each other, and so absorbed in your play that you didn't even notice their arrival? Or was the reunion perhaps less than ideal?

My parents would usually arrive home to at least two raised voices, each of us putting a strong case for the other's punishment. Our parents discovered yet again that they'd returned to be changed into judges required to umpire a quarrel. If they were out for a long time, phone calls took on the same noisy function. It was, of course, very wrong to tell tales; but reporting serious issues was a different matter.

Today, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians reminds us how such quarrels and requests for adjudication were communicated in the days before telephones and when journeys took months. I had the chance to re-read the whole of 1st Corinthians on Tuesday and I was struck by how many times Paul wrote that someone had informed him of this or that dispute amongst the people of this church he'd founded in Corinth. Either they'd written to him, or they'd travelled to find him.

First Corinthians is very much a letter sent to settle disputes – and some of them remarkably petty. These recent Christians have been bellyaching publicly about each other and about Paul. Some have been surprisingly selfish; holding communal feasts where the rich Christians eat everything – including communion – before the poorer ones even have time to get there. ^{1 Cor 11.17-34} Some people are also trying to set themselves up as having more important spiritual gifts than everyone else. ^{1 Cor 12} Understandably, Paul calls the Corinthian Christians spiritual infants ^{1 Cor 3.1-3}; he writes that they are his children, and he is their father. ^{1 Cor 4.14-17}.

But as he corrects and rebukes them, time and time again, he presents them with a tremendous vision of the transforming power of Jesus's love. Three weeks ago, we heard his hymn to love as the answer to their disputes about who had the more important spiritual gifts. As an alternative to their bickering pride – the great leveller – Paul presented these new Christians with God's Love as the unstoppable force for universal exaltation – raising up the whole creation.

Two weeks ago, we heard Paul remind everyone of the Gospel which had called them into community as a church, and then last week, he went on to deal with voices in the community saying there is no resurrection of the dead. This week, Paul seems to be tackling one or more of the community intellectuals who've been offering their own versions of what resurrection must look like. It's not easy to determine what they've been saying; we only hear one end of the 'phone call'; but they've infuriated Paul. Many scholars speculate that these dissident community members are influenced by a philosophy of their day – Middle-Platonism – which saw the physical realm as being of a lesser order than the spiritual. If they believed this, they wanted to reject Paul's teaching about our resurrection being physical.

One recent scholar offers quite a new insight. She points out that the almost universally accepted Stoic philosophy of that time would have had these dissidents arguing that the resurrection world will be an exact replica of the current one, as Stoicism says the universe repeats itself in an endless cycle of decay and carbon-copy rebirth. Imagine how that might suck the hope out of a community!

Paul responds, as we just heard, that the resurrection body is not the same as the one which dies, and yet it's absolutely in continuity with that mortal body. He offers a metaphor from nature to argue this; that death and resurrection are like planting a seed or a grain which must be utterly lost so the new life dormant within it might awaken. ³⁶'What you sow doesn't come to life unless it dies.' And the new life form is of a completely different order from the seed it springs from.

The 'fool' that Paul challenges should accept the wisdom behind this resurrection as God's – and that this is a reason for hope. And if that 'fool' wants to pontificate about the universe, Paul says that God is way ahead of any amateur philosopher, who might want to splinter a faction from the Church simply in order to become its leader of a group. God has the universe covered too. Thus Nicola started us off this morning with St Francis's *Canticle of the Sun*. 'All creatures of our God and King.'

Paul tells that 'fool' in Corinth not to try to subordinate the Christian Gospel to the popular philosophy of the time. It's like an onion seed telling God it's decided it'll grow into a river red gum. Paul says your philosophy won't determine the life form God calls out of the seed you sow.

⁵⁰'The perishable doesn't inherit the imperishable'. No; whatever imperishable existence springs from you will inherit the qualities you've cultivated in this perishable life of yours. So look out! This is quite a roasting.

Like all of Paul's teaching, it's primarily aimed at the welfare of a community; it's aimed at community cohesion, and most important of all, on community reliance on Jesus. Only then can we consider resurrection life. And what is that?

This is where we return to Joseph – and incidentally, to the same message as we find in today's Gospel. Joseph offered forgiveness and new life to those brothers of his who'd only narrowly been convinced not to kill him, but rather to sell him into a life of slavery in a foreign country. They had unintentionally sent Joseph as a seed of God's people to be planted in foreign soil. And if you go home and read his story, you'll see that he brought life to that country where otherwise there would have been death. He also transformed that country into one which could provide salvation to all the countries surrounding it. That's resurrection-life in action.

Every day we can discern glimpses of resurrection-life here and now – in the lives real people live. May these insights be planted as seeds among us and germinate to enable this community to flourish as a resurrection-life-bearer to the world. Amen