

By the grace of God: 1 Corinthians 15.1-11

For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. 1 Cor 15.9-10

Between the optimist and the pessimist, the difference is droll:
the optimist sees the doughnut — and the pessimist sees the hole.

It's that time of year again.

The flowerbed by the kitchen door has been busting with life and colour all through spring and summer. It's been a wonderful progression of hellebores and snowdrops and daffodils and tulips and red poppies and white daisies and astilbe and phlomis and purple geraniums and blue bugle and allium and pink valerian and fennel and golden rod and crocosmia and tansy and michaelmas daisies and rosemary and red campion Oh, and buttercups. And herb benet. And ground elder (yes, I'm afraid so. Quite a lot, actually).

So I decided it was time for a clear-out and a good digging over — and we're half-way there. The bed is half green, half brown. Half summer, half autumn. Part of me hates the ruthlessness of digging everything out. The dug part looks so empty and bare and brown and dead. But part of me loves it. The soil looks so good you could eat it — full of grubs for the robin — full of promise. Full of hope — full of potential for new growth — full of life. It's all a question of how you look at it.

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is almost finished — we'll get to the end on Friday. It's been a real mixed bag — threats and warnings, joy and

celebration all woven together — a bit like my garden, in fact. Paul said he felt a bit like a gardener in God's garden (3.5-9), part of a team planting and watering together — but the life in the garden, the thing that makes it grow, is God's gift.

So here, at the end, seems like a good time to go back to basics — to remind ourselves of what the gospel is all about. When I arrived in Corinth, Paul says, 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (2.2). The 'word of the cross' is fundamental to the Christian life — to the life of the church, and to all our lives as Christians. It reminds us that whatever we have is a gift from God — our individual gifts, our life together as a church, our hope for the future (1.18-25). It reminds us that what binds us together is our sharing in the body and blood of Christ (10.16-17): meet at the Lord's Table reminds us that we can only come into God's presence because Jesus opened the way through his death on the cross. Death is part of the story.

But it was never the whole story! The good news that Paul preached, that started little cells of 'Christ-people' gathering in Corinth and around the Roman world — eventually even to far-off soggy Britannia — was never just about death. The Jesus Paul preached, the Jesus who was transforming lives in Corinth, was not a dead Lord but a crucified-and-risen Lord, a Lord who had been through death, experienced everything that death could throw at him — and come out the other side.

And that doesn't just mean that Jesus died and went to heaven, snatched up to God and rescued from the ruin of this present world. To believe in the resurrection means believing that Jesus' life, the life that had brought healing and transformation to actual bodies and actual people in Galilee and Jerusalem, is still active and present in this world, in the here and now.

Paul knew people who had met him — Peter, and James, and more than 500 believers at once (15.5-7). Incredibly, Paul had met him himself. We don't know exactly what happened on the Damascus road, but to Paul it was always a meeting with the risen Lord — a light, a heavenly voice, an insistent and undeniable presence that knocked Paul off his high horse and turned his life around and gave him his marching orders (Galatians 1.13-17; Acts 26.12-18).

The gospel doesn't deny the reality of death — it doesn't have to. But it won't let death have the last word. And this means that Jesus' healing presence — the healing Robin was talking about yesterday, the healing that 'changes the whole shape of creation' — is still with us, is still part of our world, still breathing life into us and people we know, helping us to face whatever the future may bring. John Taylor says in *A matter of life and death*, "The resurrection of Jesus was, and is, still going on, both as a personal encounter with Jesus as the Lord, the living One, and as a coming-to-life on the part of the hearers. The one follows from the other. A kid from the New York slums can say, 'I know this is real. And you know why? Because Jesus Christ seemed to come right out of the Bible. He became a living person who wanted to stand with me through my problems'."

*When our hearts are wintry, grieving or in pain
Thy touch can bring us back to life again.
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been —
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.*

God bless,
Loveday

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