

Love is stronger than Death.

Readings:

1 Kings 17: 17-24

Galatians 1:11-24

Luke 11:11-17

We live in a world where we so easily refuse to accept things at face value. We want evidence that what we hear and read is genuine.

The people of Galatia were not willing to accept Paul's teaching.

They accused him of claiming an authority which he did not possess. He was writing to them as one who had spent time with Jesus, who had first hand experience of being taught by him, as had the other apostles. Yet they knew that such contact was humanly impossible for the Lord had suffered on a cross in Jerusalem.

They suspected that must have received his understanding from the apostles who had known the great teacher as a guide and friend for three years.

In his letter to them, Paul states clearly that he was not using facts which he had learnt from those who had first hand knowledge of Jesus Christ and the power of God in action. Oh no! Instead he gives testimony to his own experience of the call of God and the revelation he had received directly from the risen Lord himself.

When the apostles in Jerusalem themselves received news from the new Christian groups in Asia Minor that Paul was preaching that Christ was raised from death, they too were very suspicious. How could that zealous Jew who had formerly persecuted and killed believers now be gaining new converts and teaching them?

They needed to hear from reliable witnesses who had seen Paul and heard his preaching, to convince them that he was a man totally transformed. This was the evidence they needed to confirm the truth of his claim to have received his call directly by meeting and being taught by the risen Lord himself.

Changed lives may provide evidence for us who live in a sceptical world which demands proof before being prepared to take that first step of faith. We ask ourselves 'where is the evidence that this is all true?' 'How is it possible to believe?'

One stumbling block for us is that faith is not a second-hand gift. It cannot be passed down the generations, although having believing and practicing Christian parents or grandparents can provide the ground of persistent loving prayer in which the seeds of faith can root and grow.

The Lord has created each of us as precious unique individuals, and desires us to know his love within the security of a personal relationship with him.

We can never discover the reality of the power and love of God without choosing to act as if Jesus Christ really is alive and active. Someone once said that faith could be spelt RISK! Perhaps we should dare to ask 'What if.....?'

'What if Paul's claim that he had been given a personal revelation of the risen Jesus is true?'

'What if the accounts I have read or heard about in which people's lives have been changed are really reliable. Is that enough evidence for me?'

'What if God really is ready to forgive the past and renew my hope?'

If so should I then be willing to pray that God would enable me to accept the truth about Jesus so that I dare to trust and respond to his Spirit?'

If it is true that Jesus Christ is alive today, as we claim week by week in our churches and as he is worshipped in groups all over the world, what difference should that make to the way I live day by day?'

There are thousands of Christians, beginning with many of us here this morning, who have been convinced that the Gospel message is Good News, because through our own

experience, we have discovered that Christ's love and power can support us as we experience all that makes up human life.

Today, we have the privilege of sharing with a couple who worship in this church. They are happy and thankful to be celebrating the first 25 years of their marriage and we are delighted to mark this special occasion with them. However we know that we are not all feeling joyful. There are likely to be other people here, like myself, who have recently faced major personal loss through the death of one we love. Yet as we travel through our lives, having a growing and deepening relationship with Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, we can discover that the routine and surprises, the sorrows and joys, the bad and the good, failure and success, are not taken away but are transformed because he is with us as an unfailing companion and friend.

But there are times when God seems detached and far-away, uncaring even. Times of a desert experience when we feel isolated, alone and cut-off from all that offers comfort and support.

Think for few moments about the tragic scene awaiting Jesus as he approached the gate of Nain.

A grieving widow, alone, but in a large crowd of townspeople, taking a dead man out for burial. 'He was,' Luke records, 'his mother's only son'.

Remember the Lord's response? Did he offer his sympathy but remain aloof? No. Did he simply watch and feel sorry? No.

We read that 'he had compassion for her', he saw her despair and sorrow and shared her heart-ache (*compatio* – 'suffer with')

He prepared to show her that death was not final.

His gentle authority was apparent as he took control of the situation and moved closer to speak quietly to the grieving mother.

Then shock! Horror! He reached out his hand and touched the bier. Such an action could make a religious Jew unclean!

The bearers stood still. One could almost feel the sense of expectancy. Then he spoke 'Young man, I say to you, "Rise!" Imagine the sheer amazement and unbelief among the bystanders when the Lord's authority over death led to an immediate response and recognition; and the trembling joy of the mother, as amazingly, she was reunited with her son. The whole crowd responded with astonishment, disbelief and delight. They did not know who to look at the young lad now vitally alive, his ecstatic mother, or this stranger who had done what the prophet Elijah had done. Once again, God had come near to save and rescue them. This is what we have been waiting for.

In recording this miracle, the evangelist Luke wants us to make a connection between this scene and the later one when Jesus himself, his widowed mother's only son, is carried away from the cross for burial.

In this story the young man is brought back to ordinary life and will have to die again. Jesus' resurrection from death was to a new life in which death had been defeated and left behind for ever.

I have heard many people say: 'When you are dead you're dead.'

Some of them seem to find satisfaction in that belief.

It is certainly not a theory which I can fit into my own experience of being present immediately before and after a person dies.

A hospice Doctor wrote: 'I have seen death too often to believe in death as an end. It is not an ending but a withdrawal; as one who finishes a journey, stills the engine, turns off the lights, steps out of his car and walks up the path to the home that awaits him.'