

SATURDAY APRIL 10 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 – keep on keeping on

50 I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—

52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

55 “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

The story is told of a day when Margaret Thatcher won another General Election. A crowd gathered outside Buckingham Palace where they would catch a glimpse of her as she arrived to seek the Queen’s permission to form a new government. She was delayed; the crowd drifted away, except for one young mum with a pram. When Mrs Thatcher still did not appear, she made to go home, until she heard a voice: ‘Don’t go.’ She looked around. No-one there. A few more minutes passed. Still no appearance by Mrs Thatcher. Again, she started to walk away. Then, again: ‘Don’t go.’ She looked around and there, not far away, was a policeman, the obvious source of the voice. ‘Why not?’ she asked. His lips not moving, he replied, ‘Can’t say. Don’t go’. And a few minutes later she was rewarded with the sight of Mrs Thatcher arriving at Buckingham Palace to meet the Queen.

What has that to do, you may wonder, with the closing words of Paul’s long chapter 15 of his first letter to the church in Corinth? This is what he wrote:

“Therefore, my dear brothers [and sisters], stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

The connection is this: PERSEVERANCE, a theme we spent a week on during Lent. Paul is telling us that we make a big mistake if we imagine that what we call ‘heaven’ is going to be entirely unconnected with this life, and it’s another big mistake to see this life as waiting for that heaven. Between what now is and what is still to come are elements of *discontinuity* and there are elements of *continuity*, just as my crop of potatoes are growing out of the seed potatoes I planted a few days ago. I want to live a resurrection-fuelled life in the here-and-now marked as far as is possible by qualities of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace and thankfulness. But what’s the point, someone might still object. When you die you’ll leave it all behind. To which the Christian answer is: no, I won’t. It is what is still to come that gives meaning and direction to how we live now. When Jesus was raised from the dead on that first Easter morning, the life of the new kingdom burst out with Him, invading the present. Eternal life has already begun. All of this gives full force to the glorious words with which 1 Corinthians chapter 15 ends:

“Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

And that is the message of the resurrection, to cheer us on our way, as we continue to journey through this pandemic.