

1 Corinthians 12:27-28, 31, 13:1-13

Psalm 23

Luke 24:13-35

“Some women in our group astounded us,” report our two disciples to a stranger on their journey to Emmaus.

As we have heard in the eulogies this afternoon, Pip was an astounding woman. But our purpose now is not to extend the eulogies by launching from this into a fuller telling of everything Pip ever did. In a Christian funeral, or memorial service, two histories are laid alongside each other or, better: one is laid within another. Our purpose now is to eulogise God – a particular God: to tell this God’s story, that we might see in fuller light our stories about each other.

The astounding thing which the women in the story had brought to the group of disciples was not simply the report that the tomb of Jesus was empty. A good historian could think of no small number of plausible reasons why this might be so. The astounding thing is the interpretation of the empty tomb attributed to some helpful angels: he who was dead is now alive.

Now, the resurrection of Jesus, perhaps implying our own resurrection, might be something you would expect a preacher to go on about in a context like this. But we live in an age with a history which requires that anything said about the resurrection is better a conclusion we draw rather than a premise from which we begin. So we will not *begin* with this astounding proposal.

In the gospel reading the two disciples tell their story and then another story is told. This is an historical recounting of things familiar to them but, yet, is *strangely* retold. At the same time, while the retelling is strange it is also compelling: “Were our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road”? This is not merely an idea, such as that that dead might rise; this is emotive story-telling, emotional history. What they have experienced in Jesus and heard in the angel’s message is set within a bigger story, and they *feel* the difference. The truth in this recounting of history embraced them and moved them.

But, again, this is perhaps not the best place to start, simply juxtaposing that telling of history an astounding history to our own tellings and then trying to contrive a relationship between the two. Keeping in mind the theme of story-telling and thinking historically, we’ll turn instead to what we have heard from Paul.

The so-called “love chapter” from 1 Corinthians is always in danger of being sentimentalised: “love, love, love”. But if there is anything which Paul is not, it is sentimental.

At the centre of the chapter is a triad of existential realities: faith, hope and love. Again, it is easy to reduce this to a mere rhetorical flourish. Yet for Paul these are sub-stantial, literally standing-under words by which we might be under-stood.

Faith and hope – especially when heard in a context like this – are hopelessly religious words. But they relate to profoundly human activities, religious or not. It is faith – not now in any religious sense – which stands behind any confidence that it could be important to delve into the past – that most foreign of countries (Hartley) – doing this in order better to understand ourselves here and now. Why listen to a stranger on the road telling us where we have come from, or a professor at a lectern? However deconstructed are our metanarratives, however post -this or -that are our methodologies, the historical story-teller implies that she and those she meets in the past have something in common. This daring and mostly unexamined assumption is what binds us together, and yet is also what we *test* as we recount histories, proving them for truth or untruth.

If we have any interest in those who do and are *differently*, we imply without yet enough evidence that there is more than just the sum of us. This confidence – this together-belief – loosely but necessarily held if our stories mean anything, is nothing less than faith. It implies more than we can know; it projects a wholeness, although only as if through a glass darkly.

And hope? This is, apparently, less religious a category: surely anyone can hope? But more to the point, it is not that anyone *can* hope so much as everyone *does*. To believe that something binds us together, and yet to be compelled to test that belief, to ask questions and to dialogue with those gone before who do things differently, is to imply not just a commonality between past and present but also a common future which we desire to be realised – a future for which we hope. To desire to dialogue, to understand, to be understood, is to desire a present yet unrealised: the foreign country of a future where things will be done differently – must be done differently – but where these different things will also be *our* things, all of our things.

The point of all this is to say that our interest in what has gone before and what is going on around us, while not in any sense “religious”, nevertheless implies things we cannot express. We trust that we have something in common, but cannot prove it except in the sense of constantly testing it. In this process we imply a future which is both ours and yet what we cannot adequately envision or describe. With faith and hope the question is not *do* we believe, *do* we hope, but what beliefs and hopes are already implied in how we make our way in the world, in the stories we tell about ourselves? Most importantly, do these beliefs and hopes tell the truth about us and about those around us, by which is meant, do they “truther” us??

It is in relation to the flux of faith and hope as they imply and grasp after wholeness that love appears, as Paul says, as the greatest of these three. If faith is the sense that we are all – past, present and future – in this together, and hope is the sense that our being in this together is not yet right, then love is how we might most life-givingly be held in this place.

I remarked before the Paul is no sentimentalist. This “love chapter” is written to a community which is filled with the language of faith and hope and yet none of it works. It is divided within itself such that what is common is only difference, and what is hoped for is confused with this divided existence. Faith and hope have been prematurely resolved, and the result is deathly.

In response, Paul names this deathliness and posits love as the means by which we are held in all of our ambiguous faiths and hopes. For our faiths and our hopes are ambiguous, often invested in the wrong reading of what is happening: “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel”, the two disciples tell the stranger on the road.

But here the confusing, disorienting thing – the mistaken faith and the dashed hope – are made the basis by which they are shown that they are, indeed, still held: as the bread is broken they recognise that they have not, after all, lost what they valued. It is still there, holding them, even after everything has fallen apart. In fact, the falling apart becomes the sign of love's power. And so, from walking sadly from the scene of the crime they turn and run back: despite everything, *he is still here*; or, more to the point, he is still ours and we are still his.

If we are held by this kind of love – God's love and, we might hope, the love of those around us – then we are truly set free. We are freed to believe as we can, knowing we will not believe rightly. We are freed to hope as we must, knowing that we will not hope for enough. We are freed in the knowledge that though we must walk in death's dark vale, there is nothing to fear; we will not be lost. And all of this because love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Whether or not life might be had through death in all its forms is simply a question of the possibility of such love.

This is *love's* astounding history, within which we might dare to believe, to hope, that our history can also be found. And it is, surely, a daring thing. For to imagine that we might still stand when our faiths and hopes are shown to be null and void, perhaps not even shadows of the truth, is begin to understand what it might be to be raised from the dead. And who, really, can understand that?

And so we might perhaps be moved to pray: that God in her grace continue to bless us with astounding love and lovers, that we might know ourselves a little more as her children: in life and in death never beyond her loving reach. Amen.
