

# **IFS AND BUTS**

*(1 Corinthians 15.12-19)*

## **Introduction**

Sometime in the mid-fifties, two trainee nurses at Westminster Hospital called Gillian and Sylvia were talking about a party that had been organised that week. They were excited but all the nurses being women, there weren't enough men so Gillian was trying to round a few up including her brother Michael to make up the numbers.

Well, Michael was no dancer and it was a little inconvenient because he was busy packing his things before getting on a ship to emigrate to Canada later that week. So he wasn't all that keen. But Gillian was persuasive and in the end, as a favour to his sister, Michael grudgingly turned up to the party.

Sometime that night, Michael and Sylvia got to dance and the chemistry between them was instant and explosive. They fell in love. Michael arranged a refund on his boat ticket for Canada. They started courting, then got engaged and finally married. This story is meaningful to me because Sylvia and Michael are my mum and dad. I owe my existence to a random dance, to there not being enough men, and to the insistence of my Auntie Gill.

There's a genre of literature called alternative history. It's where authors imagine how things might have worked out if some significant event had had a different outcome. And they go back to what is called a point of divergence – or turning point - then they change it to create an alternative future.

There's actually a book called "If It Had Happened Otherwise" written in 1931 in which several authors, including Winston Churchill, imagine how the world would have turned out if... for example, Napoleon had avoided surrender at Waterloo and escaped to America instead.

## **What If the Resurrection Had Happened Otherwise?**

But the question I want to ask this morning is the one that has the greatest bearing of your life and it's this: what if the resurrection had turned out differently?

What if we could go back in time and find the point of divergence on that first Easter Sunday morning and change the accounts of the resurrection?

What if we could rework the narrative so that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John describe how the women go into the tomb, to find a bloodstained, badly lacerated, body lying cold and still like butchered meat, in that tomb the way they left it the previous Friday?

What if they wash the body down, apply their embalming spices, and then leave quietly...? What if Jesus stays dead?

That's what 1 Corinthians 15 is about. Verses 14 and 17 actually ask the question, "What if Christ has not been raised?" And it spells out the consequences. This is that genre of alternative history.

If Christ was not raised this building is little more than a shrine to dead hero. Christianity without the resurrection is not just Christianity missing the last chapter. Christianity without the resurrection is not Christianity at all. If there is no resurrection, Christianity is fantasy, praying is futile, Jesus is fake, the Bible is forged and death is final.

If Jesus was not raised, v13 says we have no afterlife either. If Jesus' skeleton is hidden away somewhere in Jerusalem v14 says preaching is hot air and faith is futile.

If the tomb was undisturbed after all, v15 says Christianity has all been lies and fabrications from the start.

If Jesus was not raised, v17 says we have no forgiveness, no freedom from the past, and no new life, just the burden of knowing we've messed up and no one can ever undo what's done.

If Jesus' remains were still lying in some shrine somewhere in Jerusalem, v18 says when we die we are lost forever.

If Jesus was not raised, v19 says we are a sad and sorry lot for having wasted our lives.

Some people say, "Look, I'm very happy in life. I've got everything I need; a great house, a good family, nice holidays, a new car – why do I need Jesus?" But whenever

people say this, they act as though their lives will go on forever, even though we know deep down that this simply isn't true. We may well live a few years longer than our parents, but none of us has an infinite supply.

And going back to v1, this is of first importance. If Christ did not rise it's over! Christianity without the resurrection is like a shelter without a roof. Or a toilet without a flush. It's why there is no trace of any kind of pilgrimage to the place of Jesus' death or burial for about 300 years. There's no point! Christ is risen.

### **The Big But...**

That's a lot of "ifs" in this reading. However, in v20 there is a "but". It's one of those turning point "buts" you find from time to time in the New Testament. There is a "but" that changes everything.

In v19-20 it says, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead..."

The resurrection changes everything. It means serving Christ in the ministries of the church is not a waste of time. It is working for things that will last forever because the gates of hell will not prevail against the church Jesus is building.

The resurrection changes everything. It means giving is not a waste of money. It is investing in things that reap a harvest of joy, faith, blessing and peace.

The resurrection changes everything. It means every prayer is heard, and the God who raises the dead can and will do amazing things in our midst.

The resurrection changes everything. It means the Holy Spirit is with us when we share our faith and, by his power at work within us, some will come to faith and be added to the number of believers. The Puzzling Questions evenings starting in a week and a half and the Queen's birthday celebrations are important opportunities for us to reach out this year.

The resurrection changes everything. It means getting to grips with the Bible's message is not futile; it feeds the soul with truth and builds up the spiritual strength of God's people.

The resurrection changes everything. It means Saint Mary's has a future that is secure as long as we're Easter Sunday people and not Holy Saturday people.

## **Ending**

I've been reading a book called "What Makes Churches Grow?" by Bob Jackson. I want the MDT to study his research in view of implementing some of his thinking here. Church of England parishes everywhere are growing - not just the big city-centre ones with lots of young adults; but rural village churches with mature congregations too. Saint Mary's has grown slightly in the last few years. If you include Messy Church it has grown significantly.

By God's grace, and with the power of the resurrection energising us, we will grow more in the future. I know I can count on you all pray, serve and give. We all know we can count on the Lord to bless.

I began by thinking about alternative histories. What if Saint Mary's had closed in the 1990s and this place was boarded up and locked all year? What if our congregation was still a handful of brave souls huddling together for warmth in the choir stalls? What if we had never done the reordering and there were still no toilets, no comfortable chairs or kitchen area? What if we still had no children coming to church and Messy Church had been a spectacular flop? If someone could have shown people then what the church would be like today they'd never have believed it.

But God has been good to us because he brings life to the dead. And he will continue to be good to us - this is what he is like.