

'And I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.'

Acts 24.15-16.

These words of Paul are part of his defence before the Roman governor, Felix. His 'crime'? Well, the Jews made up some nonsense about his 'desecrating the Temple' and being a troublemaker, vv5-6... But Paul repeated his assertion that his crime was to believe in the resurrection, vv20-1...

In his defence Paul made some interesting points. Yet again, in v14, he spoke not of 'Christianity' as though it were some abstract philosophy, but of 'The Way'... Christianity was and is a personal relationship with the living Lord Jesus Christ. It's about following him in your words and deeds every day, not just Sunday. It's a whole way of life, a way of love. It's also the way back to God where we belong.

Paul also stressed that following Jesus was not some new-fangled religion or 'cult'. It was the climax of the ancient Jewish religion which the majority of Jews refused to see. Jesus is the Messiah foretold by the OT prophets. Paul worshipped the 'God of our fathers', the same as his Jewish accusers, his brothers, vv13-15...

But it is something else in Paul's defence which leaps up at me. In v15 he spoke of there being a resurrection of 'the righteous and the wicked'. I don't know what you believe happens to you when you die, but in my experience most of what we think will happen is actually not in the Bible. Most people think that when you die, your soul leaves your body which was only ever a container, and then your soul goes to heaven or to

hell. It might surprise you that the Bible doesn't say this at all. First of all, it speaks of the resurrection of the *body*, yes a *changed* body, but still a body. Nor are we immediately resurrected, but sleep in Christ until his final coming again, when we are resurrected *together*. And *this* is the really surprising thing we discover in the Bible: the righteous are resurrected *together with* the wicked, Acts 24.15...

So why are the righteous and the wicked raised from the dead together? It is to *judge* us. P1114, Acts 17.31... Jesus himself taught exactly the same. P1069, John 5.28-29... It's also in *Revelation* at 20.12-15 on p1249...

Over the past few hundred years the Church has become feeble and marginalised because it has not proclaimed the full counsel of God. It has not preached what is in the Bible, and the one thing the Church has soft-pedalled to the point of silence is the great theme of God as Judge of all. There has been so much emphasis on God's *love*, that people have forgotten the Biblical teaching about God's anger and judgement.

And love and justice are not contradictory. Don't you loving parents get angry with your children because you *care*? How would God be loving if he passed no judgement on Adolf Hitler, Robert Mugabe, child abusers and drug-dealers?

Seeing justice done is not licking one's lips in revenge but the deepest thing in our beings. Even the youngest child cries out, 'It's not fair!' When Commander Ali Dizaei of the Metropolitan Police finally got banged to rights the other day for framing an innocent man, you could hear the collective sigh of relief from the nation: 'Justice at last'. On the other hand

we have felt that deep anger as we witnessed politicians slither their way through the Chilcott Enquiry on the Iraq War. Nothing is more frustrating than watching criminals 'get off' on a technicality. It was not easy watching murderers being released ridiculously early from prison in Northern Ireland in order to 'facilitate' the peace-process. And the result of that so-called 'peace-process' is that a well-known terrorist and murderer is now 2nd Minister in HM's Government in Stormont. Is that justice? How do you explain that to mothers and wives still grieving for their murdered loved ones?

When people conclude that there's no justice in the world, they give up on life as meaningful. It's depressing and disorienting to conclude that there's no right and wrong, and wickedness pays. So when preachers miss out the Bible's teaching on God's justice and judgement, they are depriving people of a wonderful hope: that one day everything will be put right, and the bad guys won't get away with it.

When we look at the world we can see that things are not as they should be. We all know good people who are getting it hard, while rascals are on top of the wheel. To learn from scripture that there is a God behind all this who one day will put everything right and judge the righteous and the wicked in a court where no slippery lawyers can wriggle through loop-holes is a source of huge comfort and encouragement.

We're so used in church to listening to moralising: do this, don't do that. I don't want to hear *Good Advice*. I need to hear *Good News*. I rejoice to hear that there is a God who made everything, and who can do for me and this fallen world

what we cannot do for ourselves. I take heart that Christ who died to save me from my sins and justly deserved punishment will one day come again to this world to right the wrongs. I am encouraged to know that the way things are just now is not the way things will always be. There is a just God who will sort everything out. Remember Abraham pleading with God to save the wicked city of Sodom if there were ten good people living there? Remember his great question: 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' I praise God that he is The Judge, *and* that he will indeed do right. He will one day put everything wrong in this fallen, sinful world right. I can live my life each day in the confidence that the world is not a moral chaos with no meaning, but that there is final justice in this world. Christ is coming to sort it all out. Come, Jesus! Maranatha!

So the wicked and the blasphemers and the God-mockers should watch out. 'God is *not* mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' So Mr Mugabe, Gerry Adams, Ali Dizaei, watch out! But wait a minute. If the judge of the earth will do right, how can he pass over *my* little sins? That would hardly be doing right, would it? It wouldn't be fair to judge some, however bad, and not others, however mild?

On the Cross Jesus has died to take our punishment. If we repent and put our trust in him, we can be clothed in *his* righteousness, so that when God the Father looks at us, he sees not us in our sinful rags but Jesus his Son in his perfection. If we put our trust in him, Jesus will speak up for us on the Day of Judgement. He will plead our case to his heavenly Father. That's better than Good Advice; it's Good News.