

'My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead.'
Acts 23.6.

I would like us to go back now to when Paul was before the Jewish religious court, the Sanhedrin. It had got quite hot and heavy. You will remember that Ananias, the High Priest, had quite irregularly, ordered Paul to be slapped in the face. It was at that point that Paul came out with this extraordinary statement: 'I am on trial because of my hope in the resurrection'. How on earth could you be on trial because of your belief in the resurrection? And why did Paul say this now?

Part of the reason was that Paul was being crafty. He was using the old divide-and-rule tactic. At the Sanhedrin were Pharisees and Sadducees, and we know from v8 that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. The Sadducees were the priestly party, the Jewish aristocrats with an ancient lineage from the famous Zadok the Priest in the OT. It might surprise you to learn that there is no real belief in the resurrection in the OT. So the Sadducees were simply sticking to the old orthodoxy. It was the upstart Pharisees who believed in this recent novelty. Pharisees get a bad press for being hypocrites, but actually they started out well. When the Greeks invaded Israel and introduced their pagan ways, it was the Pharisees who resisted. They were brave men who refused to collaborate with the new regime and its heathen ideology. Perhaps if our western church leaders had been more pharisaical in refusing to collaborate these past 200 years with the dominant Enlightenment project, our churches would be fuller. Pharisees were not all bad. they started well, and then became proud and

self-righteous. But Paul had a good pedigree as a Pharisee, v6a... That's why he called them 'brothers'. He took the issue of the resurrection to pit the Pharisees against the Sadducees.

But it was more than a ploy. The resurrection was absolutely fundamental to Paul. Remember that he had never met Jesus while he was alive, *and* that, as a professional Pharisee, Paul had made his name by rubbishing Jesus and his deluded followers whom he gleefully persecuted. So what changed everything? It was his spectacular encounter with the resurrected Lord Jesus on his way to Damascus to persecute yet more Christians. The resurrected Jesus was the only Jesus Paul knew. He was so real he could not deny the evidence of his own eyes and ears. Paul's whole life was now turned upside down. Everything he had ever stood for was not shewn to be false. How could he go back to his old Pharisees friends as though nothing had happened? He could not deny the truth. And the truth of the risen Lord Jesus was so overwhelming that he had no choice but to walk away from his colleagues, his high reputation, his family, his old certain way of life.

He gave up everything for coming to terms with the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. He walked out from comfort to a very uncertain future, but he had met the living God. Paul said this at *Phil* 3.7: 'Whatever used to be to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ'. Paul was on trial for the resurrection. He repeated this to the Governor Felix. In fact the resurrection is so fundamental to Paul's thinking, (because it was fundamental to his own experience of Christ), that he says that if it is not true, then the whole belief

collapses. Turn to p1155, 1 Cor 15.12-19... Pretty stark!

If the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so crucial, why have Christians been undermining it for so long? Why do we have bishops who see it only as a 'conjuring trick with bones', and theologians who see it as only *symbolically* true? If the resurrection of Jesus is only *symbolically* true, then it basically didn't happen. Jesus was raised only in some metaphorical sense. What you are saying is a) God can't raise the dead, b) Jesus isn't *really* alive today, c) there's nothing beyond the grave for us, and d) the Bible is lying. No wonder people don't go to church anymore! We have nothing to say.

It is extraordinary that so many Christians in the west reject the resurrection by explaining it away in terms which are acceptable to rationalistic Enlightenment of the 18thC. But that is the whole point. Paul was on trial for the resurrection. The Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire and Rousseau and Diderot were atheists. They put the churchmen of the day and of today on trial for the resurrection of Christ and his other miracles. Explain it, Voltaire demanded, and the churchmen, so anxious to be liked by the smart-set, gave in.

You see, if the resurrection of Jesus Christ is true, then he really is God, as the Bible claims. Let's turn to p1128, to the beginning of the mighty epistle to the *Romans*, 1.1-4...: 'declared with power to be God's *Son*, by his resurrection'.

So, if the resurrection actually happened as the Bible says, then the atheists are all wrong. So you can see that they have a vested interest in rubbishing the belief and the daft Christians who keep peddling it. Since the 18thC Enlightenment

Christians have been only too happy to support the atheists by saying that Jesus was just a teacher, just a prophet, just a good man, just a noble example of love - but *not* the Son of God, and certainly not resurrected and still alive today.

If the resurrection was *true*, then the venerable Sadducees were wrong. No wonder Paul was on trial! It was life and death to them. If the resurrection is true, and Jesus really *is* the Son of God, then the *Muslims* are wrong too! If the resurrection is true, what does poor old Richard Dawkins do now? What do all these people, who go through life thinking there is no God to answer to, do now, if the resurrection is true, and there really *is* a God, and Jesus really *is* alive, and he really *is* going to come one day to judge the quick and the dead?

So it's not really very hard to see that an awful lot of people today and these past 2000 years have an awful lot of reasons to rubbish the resurrection. They are not coming at its truthfulness from a neutral point of view. A lot of people have a lot to lose, if Paul was right: he really met the risen Lord Jesus that day on the way to Damascus. That's why Paul was on trial for his hope in the resurrection. Everything hangs on it.

If there is so much vested interest in rubbishing the truth of Easter, then we Christians need to recognise that, and not allow Christ's enemies to seduce us into reducing Jesus to just a good man and a wise (but dead) teacher. Let's get back to what the Bible actually says of him. He is nothing less than the glorious Son of God, wonderfully raised from the dead at Easter to give us real hope for the future. I don't know about you, but I'm prepared to go on trial for that.