

[King David said]: 'But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.' 2 Samuel 12.23.

I'm sure you have heard the letters USP - not USB, the lead you plug into your computer, but USP. Anyone in business knows that USP stands for 'Unique Selling Point'. Why should anyone want to buy your product or use your service? What has it got to offer that no other product or service can provide? What is its USP? As we have been working our way through Acts, the one thing we have noticed is the phenomenal rate of growth of the Jesus movement, and that is particularly amazing when you consider all the forces that were against it, from the opposition of the Roman State and the hostility of the Jewish religious establishment which between them murdered Jesus on Good Friday, down to the contempt of the educated and the plain indifference of the masses. So how was it that these Jewish fishermen were able to convert the whole Roman empire within a few centuries, even the emperor Constantine in 312?

What was Christianity's USP? It was this fantastical declaration that God had raised his Son Jesus from the dead. And because he had been raised from the dead, those who put their trust in Jesus would be raised to new life also.

For centuries human beings had longed for this hope of life beyond the grave; that one day they would see their loved ones again in a happier place. Some talked of Paradise; others of the Elysian fields, but it was all longings, wishful-thinking, dreaming. Even the OT - and this might surprise you - even the OT has no real sense of life-after-death. The OT talks of a shady place called Sheol, but that's about it.

May I share with you a story from the OT? It's not a very well-known story, but it is beautiful, and as we go through it, you will see how it has become important to Laura and me. It's on p315, at 2 Sam 12. King David was a very great man. He had a great heart for God. He was a brave man, who was a bit of a softie, especially when it came to children. His weakness was for women, especially the beguiling Bathsheba with whom he had an adulterous liaison. As a result Bathsheba gave birth to a baby, who soon became dangerously ill, v15... David was beside himself, vv16-17... After seven days the child died, but David's courtiers were too frightened to tell him, v18...

David sensed what had happened, v19... His courtiers thought he would lose his head, but his reaction completely took them aback. He dressed, and ate, and, remarkably went into the house of the Lord 'and worshipped' v20... Amazing!

The courtiers were absolutely non-plussed at this strange reaction, v21... And then David gave this amazing answer. The first part, in v22, is conventional enough ... But v23 is a verse for you to underline and treasure ... 'Can I bring [my baby] back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.' Where did David get that extraordinary thought from? Surely it must have been the Holy Spirit speaking through him, for we find nothing like that in the rest of the OT.

David knows that his baby boy will not come back to life again. But he also knows that the cord tying him to his boy is not broken. St Paul in *Romans 8* tells us that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God. David knows that his son's death is not the end of the story. The

boy cannot come back to him, but he will one day go to him.

Now where did David get that amazing idea from? Who put it in his heart? And David is not alone in thinking that. I come across many people, many of whom would never darken the door of a church, but when their loved one dies, they all believe that one day, somehow, they shall see them again. Do they not all say with David, 'Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me'.

Why do people have this longing? Do sheep have it? Cattle, dogs, woodlice? But we do. Why? Scripture gives us an explanation. In *Ecclesiastes* 3 in the OT, we read in v11: '[God] has also set *eternity* in the hearts of men'. God has put the thought in our heart, *not* to accept death as the end; *not* to believe that our relationships with our loved ones, in whom we have invested so much love and time and energy, are ended by death. It is God who has made us to look *outwards*, away from our selves, and *upwards* to eternity.

In the midst of his terrible grief and loss, King David had those eternal longings: 'I will go to him'. But they were only longings, dreams, hopes, as they are for so many countless millions of people today going through their own personal tragedies. Millions of people in the Roman empire of the 1stC also had to come to terms with the deaths of their loved ones. At school I read the Latin letters of Cicero. They are all highly polished and clever, but one stands out. It is the letter in which he expressed his grief over the death of his beloved daughter Tullia. Cicero followed the Stoic school of philosophy, the stiff upper lip, but it failed him.

And into this world of sadness and longings came those Galilæan fishermen with this wild claim about God raising his Son Jesus from the dead. The Egyptians had their famous legend of Osiris rising from the dead, and the Greeks celebrated Persephone rising from the underworld every year, but everyone *knew* these were just legends. There was something *different* about this resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter and James and John and Thomas and all the rest of the disciples admitted that they had found it impossible to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. The only thing that convinced them was the risen Lord Jesus actually standing in front of them inviting them to touch him. Even the arch-christian hater, Saul of Tarsus, was converted when Jesus confronted him on the Damascus Road. And so these first Christians were seen to be in deadly earnest about the Resurrection. People were amazed that they were prepared even to *die* for this truth.

The truth of the risen Lord Jesus soon became the USP of the Church. For thousands of years people like King David had longed for life beyond the grave. Now, in this person Jesus Christ, those ancient, heart-felt longings could become more than wishful-thinking, but reality. Jesus once said , 'Because I live, you shall live also'. This spoke new hope to pagan Rome with all its legends and mythologies and empty rituals.

21stC pagan Britain is not so different from 1stC Rome. People still grieve and long to see their loved ones again. The Easter message of the risen Lord Jesus is our USP. Because of Christ raised from the dead, David can go to his dead baby. Inside and outside the church, we all need to hear this.