

23.3.08 (Easter Day), 10am, 1 Corinthians 15.50-58

There must be someone here who has joined a gym, full of good intentions about getting really into shape - and you were really keen for the first month, and then you couldn't be bothered, and now you haven't been for ages. (Anyone willing to own up to that?!).

You see, if you want to get into physical shape, you've also got to get the bits of you that you can't see into shape - your mind, and your attitudes.

This week some experts produced some tips on boosting your motivation. They suggested:

Have a "work-out buddy" (this was American, can you tell?) - someone to exercise with, to keep you going.

Psych yourself up - listen to uplifting music before you exercise.

And - if you can believe it - sniff peppermint. It increases your running speed, apparently.

Getting fit means getting into shape physically and mentally.

It's no different when it comes to being fit for heaven - fit for an eternity with God.

Now, when God tells us in the Bible about the future, he doesn't tell us very much about life immediately after death.

That might be a surprise to you - the Bible tells us some things, but not a great deal, about life immediately after death, before Jesus returns.

Instead, what God is more interested in telling us about is life after the day when Jesus Christ has returned, as saviour and judge.

One day Christ will return, and on that day God will renew the whole creation . There'll be a new heaven and a new earth.

Turn with me in the Bible to see that - right at the end of the Bible, Revelation 21.1-4 [READ].

This week we had a fascinating meeting here with a guest-speaker, Ian McCormack. He's got a powerful story to tell about how he was declared clinically dead in hospital, and how, before he was brought back to life, God spiritually showed him what this new creation would be like.

It's like this world - but this world as it's meant to be.

It's like the brief moments of bliss and beauty we experience, which are so fleeting, but now magnified and extended for ever.

It's this world, but renewed by God, stripped clean of all the mess that we human beings have brought into it.

It's the kind of world everyone wants - and one day God will step in and make it happen.

There are some CDs at the back of Ian telling his story. It's gripping, and you're welcome to take one home free of charge.

So it's pretty obvious that to live in God's new world, that he'll make one day, we've got to be fit for it both spiritually and physically.

There can't be anything impure in that new world - otherwise it won't be heavenly any more.

Anyone who reckons that they're spiritually fit enough for heaven as they are, just isn't being honest, are they.

An older man said to me after a church service this week: "I've always been taught to do the right thing, and I hope that that's enough for God."

If that's what you've been taught, then you've been badly misled - and dangerously misled.

You see, that would be like me lining up to run a marathon, in the physical shape I'm in, hopeful that I'll make it. It's just a delusion. I'll be collapsed in a heap before I get half-way round. None of us is fit morally and spiritually as we are to go straight to heaven, because however hard we try we can't strip all the impurity and selfishness from our thoughts and actions.

When it's put in those terms, I doubt I have to convince you we're not fit for heaven, as we are, spiritually.

But we've also got a physical problem with heaven. Our bodies are not fit to be part of the new world that God will make.

Turn back to 1 Corinthians 15.50 [READ].

God's new creation will be a world where nothing ever decays, where there's no more death.

But however much exercise we do, however many face-lifts you have, most bits of our bodies just keep heading further south - sagging, and declining. (For blokes, the hair that used to be on our heads suddenly appears up your nose and in your ears.)

So here's the problem - we're not fit to enter the new creation - not fit spiritually, and not fit physically.

But wonderfully here's the great message that Easter brings:

1. God can make us totally fit for heaven (50-53).

The two great events of Easter each make us fit for heaven.

Good Friday - the crucifixion - can make us fit for heaven spiritually.

As Christ was dying, he shouted out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?".

And that was a very strange thing for him to say. Because he was the only perfect man who ever lived. He's the only one who's ever deserved not to have God forsake him.

So what was going on? Just watching the events, or seeing them on TV on "The Passion", won't tell you the meaning. We need God's explanation in the Bible. To see that with me, turn on to 2 Corinthians 5.21 [READ].

Our "sin" is simply our ignorance of God - our choosing to go our way, not his. That's rebellion, and God is rightly angry with us for having lived in his world, as if he didn't really matter.

When Jesus died, he willingly chose to be treated as if he were us - as sinful.

He did that lovingly, as our substitute, so that God would treat us as if we were him - and so forgive us, heal us spiritually, and restore our relationship with him.

Jesus is God's Son, and so because of his death we can become God's children.

If we accept what Jesus has done as being for us, then Good Friday, the crucifixion, means our spiritual healing, making us fit for eternity with God.

But Jesus didn't stay dead. He died on Friday afternoon - but by Sunday morning his tomb was empty, and there was no corpse. Before long hundreds of people had seen him alive again, and they knew it was him.

They weren't expecting it. They didn't hallucinate it. They were as surprised as anyone - but there he was in front of them - made new physically.

And it's the **resurrection that can make us fit for heaven** - fit for God's new creation - physically.

Go back to 1 Corinthians 15, and look there at verses 51-53 [READ].

God raised Jesus with a new physical body, that would never die.

And that set the mould for every follower of Christ.

Everyone who unites themselves to Christ by trusting him - God will one day give them a new physical body.

It'll be a body just like the one he gave Jesus at his resurrection.

Here in the Bible God calls it an imperishable body - an immortal body - one that will never get sick or flabby or succumb to sin - one that will never die.

I'm certain that this teaching from the Bible is news for some of us here - and it's good news! We too often think of heaven as just life after death - our spirits floating around, reunited with loved ones.

But the real future is life after life after death - when Jesus has returned, and his followers are given new bodies so that are fit to live in his new world.

You see Easter is not just a 2000-year-old bit of history, that God did for Jesus back then.

Good Friday - the cross - demonstrates how God can make us spiritually fit now.

Easter Day - the resurrection - sets the pattern for the new body that God will give to every follower of Christ.

If you want to know what your body will look like when your eighty, I guess you could look at your Mum or Dad when they're eighty! (That may or may not be very encouraging!).

And if you want to look forward to the glorious imperishable body God will give you when Christ returns... look back at Christ's resurrection, because God will give you the same kind of body he gave Jesus.

God will make us fit for his new creation - spiritually and physically.

He'll do it - just as surely as Christ died for you, and just as surely as Christ rose from the dead.

Let me say here: if you have doubts about the physical resurrection of Christ as a historical event, next Sunday will be a real help to you, because the sermon will be all about the historical evidence.

Now all of this makes Paul do two things:

He taunts death, and he bursts out in thankfulness to God:

2. Thank God!, he says. We have victory over death through Jesus (54-57).

Listen to verses 54-57 [READ].

Death is our greatest enemy.

You can buy anti-wrinkle cream - you can get a hair transplant - you can buy underwear that will make your belly look smaller (so I gather) - we can stave off ageing in so many ways - but in the end death will pick each one of us off.

Everyone ends up either in the crematorium, or in a box in the ground.

Death looks like the ultimate book-maker - it looks like he wins every time.

And what's so awful about that is that death stalks the world because we have fallen away from God.

Right back in the Garden of Eden, God promised Adam and Eve that they would die, if they disobeyed.

They did - and so has everyone who's come after them - and death looks like it reigns in the world.

But the Lord Jesus Christ defeated death. He let death take hold of him for a moment, but then he burst out the other side into new life. He defeated physical death - and he defeated death as the curse that has come on us because of sin.

We all still have to die - but for everyone who trusts Christ, the future is not death, but eternal life in God's new world.

No wonder Paul taunts death, like a soldier bending down in the battle-field taunting his dying enemy: "Where is your victory now, O death? Where now is your sting?"

Any Christian facing death can say the same, with the same confidence.

And then Paul thanks God, and acknowledges that the victory comes only through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's be clear: heaven will not be full of people saying, "Thank goodness I made it here by doing enough work for charity" / "I'm glad I treated my family a bit better than the bloke next door did, otherwise I might not be here."

Let's be even clearer - anyone who's hoping to find that in heaven, is actually doing the one thing you can do find yourself excluded for all eternity.

There is a victory over death - and it can be ours.

But it will only be ours if we unite ourselves to Jesus Christ - trusting in his death for our forgiveness - and confident of a resurrection like his. Only then will we be fully fit for life in God's new creation.

The only way I could run a marathon is if a real marathon-runner gave me his body and his spirit. That's just make-believe, of course - but it's not make-believe to say that Jesus can give us all we need to get us into God's new creation.

Heaven will not be full of eternal back-slapping of ourselves that we did enough in this life to earn our passage there - but full of eternal praise of Jesus for what he achieved for us.

And then, in the final verse of this chapter, God gives us a wonderfully simple, practical conclusion. Do you see it there in verse 58? [READ]. **3. Stand firm now (verse 58).**

There might be someone here who is genuinely interested in Jesus Christ, but you hold back because you're not sure if you'll be able go the distance as a Christian - and you don't want to give yourself to it, unless you're sure you've got what it takes.

Let me say: I understand that worry, but you have nothing to fear. Christ's death for you is the anchor that secures your relationship with God. His resurrection is the cast-iron guarantee securing your future with God. Jesus has given you all that you need, so that you can stand firm.

And to the Christian who finds their commitment to Christ wavering - or the Christian who finds that their enthusiasm to keep labouring for Christ is fading - maybe it's getting harder to be obedient to his teaching at work, because no one seems to notice - harder to treat your family in a godly way, because everything seems to go wrong anyway - harder to give yourself to a ministry within the church-family, because it doesn't seem to produce any results - harder to be devoted to prayer and Scripture, because none of it seems to make you feel any better...

When we're wondering if being a committed Christian is really worth it -

the solution is not in seeking out some new thrill - finding some new activity to be involved in, or seeking after a new spiritual experience.

The only solution is to let the Lord take your mind and heart back to Friday and Sunday - the cross and the resurrection.

Because right there is the Lord's demonstration that the future for the believer is cast-iron certain, and that no work for the Lord is ever useless.