

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 17th February 2019
1 Corinthians 15: 12 - 20

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise
I rise
I rise.

Maya Angelou, American poet, singer, memoirist, and civil rights activist believes in resurrection. She believes that she - and importantly, those gone before her in the huts of history's shame and a past that's rooted in pain - will rise.

Maya Angelou is dead now, she died in 2014, and despite the fact that clearly, she has not been bodily resuscitated, nevertheless her words about her resurrection have lost none of their force and power. Perhaps, that is because the 'I' in the poem is a collective 'I', it might not refer to her as an individual; 'I rise' might mean, we as a people will live on.

There is that sense, but nevertheless I think that it can't be denied that the 'I' in the poem is primarily meant to be both a collective 'I' and a personal one. She means Maya Angelou will rise, as will all those who are part of the, 'black ocean, leaping and wide, welling and swelling, bearing in the tide.'

Maya Angelou believes in resurrection. She believes that no matter what has happened in the past, or what will happen, she will rise along with the black ocean. She believes that her life as an individual and their lives were not, as Paul writes in the letter to the Christians in Corinth, which we read, lived in vain; they are not, as Paul writes in that letter, to be pitied; those who have suffered and endured, their lives are not, as Paul writes, "utterly lost", for she and they will rise.

Of course, Paul was not writing about Maya Angelou, and those like her – he didn't know her or them – he is writing about Jesus Christ and people who follow him,

If it is for this life only that Christ has given us hope, we of all people are most to be pitied. But, the truth is, Christ was raised to life – the firstfruits of the harvest of the dead.¹

Clearly, the power of the poem comes from an understanding that "I rise" means to get back up, to stand up, when you have been knocked over. And, towards the end of the poem she takes this metaphor further, believing that even those who have died, those who are part of history, those from the past who were knocked over, will get back up.

But, in the preface to one of her public readings of this poem she interpreted the meaning of 'rise' in a different way. Instead of interpreting it to mean to get up, to stand up when you have been knocked down, she says that by rise she means to wake up - to rise up from sleep, to rise in the morning.

¹ 1 Cor 15: 19 - 20

She said,

Everyone in the world has gone to bed one night or another with fear, or with pain, or loss, or disappointment, and yet each of us has awakened or risen, somehow made our ablutions, seen other human beings and said 'Morning, how are you?' 'Fine, thanks, and you?' It is amazing; wherever that abides in the human being there is the nobleness of the human spirit, despite it all. We rise.²

The nobleness of the human spirit, she says, is in rising in the morning and carrying on, despite what might have befallen us the night before. What is interesting is that this interpretation of rise, to rise in the morning, is the same meaning as the verb that Paul uses when he wrote the words raised and resurrection in the passage we read. The verb he uses is the same one you would use, if you were speaking Greek 2,000 years ago, to describe getting up in the morning from a night's sleep - rising in the morning.

Now if this is what we proclaim, that Christ was raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?³

Maya Angelou and Paul believed in resurrection. They believed that those who believe will rise, that even at the end of their lives they will fall asleep and then the morning will come, and they will rise up.

Of course, they don't mean literally that when we die, we fall asleep. We don't, that's obvious. And, just as they don't mean literally that we fall asleep at the end of our lives, so they don't mean literally that when we rise our dead bodies will be resuscitated. What they mean is that there will come a time when the lives of those who believe in the dignity of human beings, to use Maya Angelou's words, or in God's Kingdom, God's love for humanity, to use Paul's words from two chapters previously, their lives will be justified, no matter how they felt when they fell asleep. There will come a time when the lives of those who believe will rise up, will be justified.

You can't keep human dignity down, we will rise in the morning. You can't keep God's love down, we will rise in the morning. God's kingdom will reign, it will come. Our lives have not been lived in vain, even if they crucify us for living this way, they can't keep us down. We know this because they crucified Christ and he rose. Not as a resuscitated body - the accounts of the resurrection confirm that, Christ was transformed, no one recognised him on that first Easter morning. He didn't rise as a recognisable, resuscitated body, but in some way he rose. He could not be kept down, or in the grave.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqOqo50LSZ0>

³ 1 Cor 15: 12

So too with us who believe, along with Maya Angelou and with Paul and with so many others throughout history, we too, we who believe in human dignity and in God's love will rise, in time; not as resuscitated bodies, obviously, but as Paul writes later on in Chapter 15, which we'll read next week, in the way a plant is to a seed, something transformed,

But, you may ask, how are the dead raised? He writes. In what kind of body? How foolish! The seed you sow does not come to life unless it has first died; and what you sow is not the body that shall be... There are earthly bodies and heavenly bodies.

Maya Angelou believes in resurrection, Paul believes in the resurrection, and so should you. You should believe it, because if you don't then, as Paul says, all this is in vain. If God's kingdom is not going to come, if human dignity will not flourish, if we will not rise in the morning after the night time terrors, then what is the point, for those who would crucify human dignity; those who would crucify God's love; those who would crush our spirits – and there are plenty of them everywhere at all times, just ask Maya Angelou or anyone like her – they will triumph, now and always.

Of course, we do not know in what way we will rise - we will be different, just as a plant is different from the seed that precedes it - but with Maya Angelou and with Paul, faith is about believing that we will rise.

We'll talk more about Jesus' resurrection at Easter, of course. The reading from Corinthians today is not so much about Jesus' resurrection, as it is about the resurrection of those who believe in him, our resurrection. It was that which the church in Corinth was struggling with.

The belief in a resurrection had not been part of Jewish thought for a long time, perhaps two or three hundred years at the time Paul was writing this. But, the first disciples when they encountered Jesus in the way they did after his death, understood that encounter in terms of the relatively recent Jewish belief in a resurrection of the dead.

The members of the church in Corinth were trying to understand what that meant for them, and there were many different views. Some said there would be a bodily resuscitation; others said that there would be no resurrection, that it happened to Jesus only; others argued about who and who would not be resurrected; and there were many other opinions.

No wonder they were debating this, I suppose, the idea of a resurrection is a startling belief: this belief that even when we die, what we believed in, what we lived for, our lives, will nevertheless somehow rise up and live on; that living as Christians, following Jesus, building God's kingdom, believing in God's love is not something we do in vain, despite the fact that we die; it is not something

that is null and void, despite the fact that we die; it is not nothing, despite the fact that we die; that in faith we are reborn, despite the fact that we die.

It is a startling belief, or, perhaps it isn't so startling when we read Maya Angelou's poem. It is a powerful belief that in this world we can find the determination to get up when we are knocked down, but what is even more powerful is the belief that just as we fall asleep at night, so we will rise in the morning to live in the dignity and the love of God's kingdom. What we believe is not in vain, we will rise.