

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2019**  
*1 Corinthians 15: 12 - 20*

I bought a book this week called *A Fish is a Fish*. The story is about a fish who lives in a pond alongside his friend from birth, a tadpole. The tadpole eventually grows into a frog and begins to go up onto dry land. Some while later, the frog returns to the pond and tells the fish what he's seen.

The frog describes all kinds of things like birds, cows and people. As the frog explains these things to his friend we see, in thought bubbles over the fish's head, what the fish imagines all of that to look like: for the bird we see him imagining a fish with wings and a tail; for the cow a fish with udders, four legs and horns; and for people a fish standing up on its tail and walking upright.

*A Fish is a Fish* was written by Leo Leoni in 1970, and ever since it has been used by psychologists as a way of explaining something called Constructivist Thinking. *A Fish is a Fish* illustrates how our learning is laid down in layers. It is constructed on a bedrock of who we are, and any new experience or thinking is built on that original foundation.

The book is a book for children of course and when I read it to Aidan for the first time, I was wondering whether I would have to explain to him what was going on in the story - that the fish can only think of a cow or a bird or a person in terms of a fish. But I needn't have worried, Aidan got it straight away and found it hilariously funny. He understood immediately that the fish can only imagine something it doesn't know in terms of something that it does know.

I didn't need to worry about Aidan understanding the concept, but Paul, the author of the extract of the letter we read this morning, did need to worry. His audience, the Christians who made up the church in Corinth to whom he was writing, didn't get it, and Paul found that so frustrating that he boiled over with anger.

*But, you may ask, how are the dead raised? In what kind of body? How foolish!<sup>1</sup>* he wrote. *All flesh is not the same flesh.* For Paul, the most important thing about the Christian faith is Jesus Christ's resurrection. For him, it is that event which assures us that living the Christian life is not in vain. The resurrection asks us to believe that not even death can destroy either the hope of God's kingdom coming to reign, nor can it destroy the effectiveness of the way we live now in bringing about God's kingdom here on earth.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15: 35

The Christians in Corinth though were not thinking about that, instead they were divided and arguing about metaphysical biology. They wanted to know in what way they themselves would be resurrected; in what kind of body, as what kind of people? Paul's frustration with them was because - as a Fish is a Fish illustrates - we cannot conceive of the kind of body we will have after our deaths, just like the fish could not conceive of the kind of body a cow has.

*All flesh is not the same flesh, Paul writes, there is flesh of men, flesh of beasts, flesh of birds, and of fishes – all different. There are heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; and the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one thing, the splendour of the earthly another.<sup>2</sup>*

In the story, *A Fish is a Fish*, the fish eventually tries to leave the water itself to see the cows and the birds and the people. Of course, it almost dies trying to do this, but is rescued by the frog who rolls the fish back in to the water, and tells it not to worry about what the other flesh looks like, just accept that fish is fish, everything else is something different.

We can't imagine what spiritual bodies we will possess as resurrected people, so stop worrying about it, is Paul's message to the members of the church in Corinth. His message goes further than that though. He tells them also that it is not just their flesh that will be unimaginably different in the resurrection, they themselves will also be unimaginably different.

Paul describes a transformation from earthly body to spiritual body. He says that the fleshly earthly body we have encloses within it our souls, and not only will our earthly, fleshly body be transformed in to a different heavenly body, but our earthly souls will be transformed also in to our spirit. We have now an earthly body that encloses our souls, we will have a heavenly body that will enclose our spirit.

The resurrection is a double transformation: our bodies will be transformed, and so will we, who live in our bodies, be transformed. We will be transformed from beings who are animated by our souls to beings who are animated by spirit.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 15: 39 40

I suppose what Paul is saying – to return to the book *A Fish is a Fish* – is that we are not really fish at all, we are tadpoles. One day our tadpole-flesh will die, and it will be transformed into the flesh of a frog. What's more, one day our tadpole-natures will also die, and the nature of who we are, our understanding of what we are, will be transformed into the nature of a frog.

We are people with human flesh and human consciousness, but one day we will be transformed in to spiritual beings with a spiritual consciousness. This concept of resurrection matters to Paul, not because he wants to lecture on the nature of metaphysical biology, but because he believes that our belief in this future transformation makes a difference to our lives in the here and now.

I discovered the book *A Fish is a Fish* because I was reading an article<sup>3</sup> written by a priest in the Church of England who was born, brought up and now works in a church in what she describes as a working-class parish in Crewe. Her article was about middle-class dominance in the Church of England, and how there are not enough priests from working-class backgrounds working in working-class parishes.

In working-class parishes she argues there are mostly middle-class priests and that is because when it comes to ordination, the Church of England discriminates against people from the other world of working-class backgrounds, particularly if they have working class accents. She argues that the particular problem that this presents is that it is impossible for middle-class people to fully understand working-class problems, and she uses the book *A Fish is a Fish* to illustrate this.

Middle-class people, she argues, will only ever understand the world from the foundation of their middle-class lives. If we really want to minister effectively to people in working-class areas, she writes, we need to ordain people as priests from those working-class areas.

She goes on to say that if the middle-class Church of England really wants to understand the issues facing working-class people, then it needs to hear the voices of those people from those areas, it needs to believe that those people know what they are talking about' the middle-class Church of England can't begin to understand what it is like to be working-class until working-class voices are heard throughout the Church of England.

This is also the point that Paul is making in our reading this morning, and it is the point he has been developing over the past few chapters of his first letter to the Corinthians, which we have been reading throughout January and February.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://lynnecullens.com/2019/02/15/some-notes-on-class-relevance-and-the-church/>

We have been born and brought up in the fallen world of fallen flesh, he argues, and we only see and understand ourselves and our world from this perspective.

There is much wrong with this world and with how we go about living in it. There is a better way, which we can aspire to, to live today in this world, but that won't be fully realised until God's Kingdom reigns on earth. But, we can't know that there is a better way to live unless someone comes and tells us about it, unless we listen to the voices from that better world, from that better way to live. The voice that we should be listening to, the Word that we should be hearing from that other world, from that better place, is the voice of the person Jesus Christ.

But, even if we are listening to that voice bringing God's Word, even then we shouldn't think that we can fully understand what God's Kingdom is like and what it is like for us to live in it because we are – like the fish in the story – bound by our fish-like bodies and fish-like natures.

The only thing we can do is to believe, that is to have faith, that the voice of Jesus Christ coming from God's Kingdom is an authentic voice of experience – just like the voice from the working-class is the authentic voice of experience from that world – and that this voice from that place can transform us, so that it changes the way we live now, and assures us that this changed life we live is not in vain for it reflects the complete transformation that one day will take place of our flesh, of our souls, of our world and of our lives.