

My Favourite Atheist

I Corinthians 15.1–14

I put a note on our Facebook page about this sermon last week, and in the note I referred to a man named Christopher Hitchens, and I called him ‘my favourite atheist’. I thought I’d better begin by explaining why he’s my favourite, because it’s not because he’s a nice guy or anything like that (I’ve no idea, never met him), it’s because of the way he approaches his atheism.

Hitchens is the closest thing yet to an atheist evangelist. He travels the country trying to persuade people that there is no god and that the sooner people stop kidding themselves that there is, the better off society will be. His latest book is called *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* and it’s been on the New York Times best-seller list ever since it was published two years ago, and was No 1 on the list at one point, although it’s down to No 32 now. One reason he’s my favourite atheist is because he is intelligent, articulate, personable, and very, very persuasive. I hate to say this, but if he were to come in here and give his talk to this church, I’m sure that he would convince some of you. Whatever you think of his ideas, he is at least a first-class exponent of them, and that’s always something to respect. But the thing I like most about him is that when he talks about Christianity, he talks

about the real thing. He understands the Christian faith not only better than many believers, but better than some clergy.

There's a wonderful interview that was published not long ago¹ in which a retired minister interviews Hitchens, and in which Hitchens ends up telling the minister that she's not actually a Christian at all. She says to him, 'the religion you cite in your book is generally the fundamentalist faith of various kinds. I'm a liberal Christian, and I don't take the stories from the scripture literally. I don't believe in the doctrine of atonement (that Jesus died for our sins, for example). Do you make any distinction between fundamentalist faith and liberal religion?' Here's his reply: 'I would say that if you don't believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and Messiah, and that he rose again from the dead and by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, you're really not in any meaningful sense a Christian.' When she tries to convince him that you can be a Christian even if you believe that all the stuff in the New Testament about Jesus rising from the dead is not actually true, Hitchens reminds her of v 19 of our reading this morning: 'Paul says, very clearly,'—I'm quoting Hitchens now—'that if it is not true that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, then Christians are of all people the most unhappy.' Our translation puts it this

¹<http://www.portlandmonthlymag.com/arts-and-entertainment/category/home/articles/christopher-hitchens/>

way: ‘we are to be pitied more than all men’ if our hope in Christ isn’t the hope based on the literal truth of the resurrection. So that’s why he’s my favourite atheist: he at least knows what it is he has rejected, and knows it better than some Christians know what they have accepted.

Some Christians even in New Testament times weren’t all that clear about what it was that they were asked to put their faith in, either. They were like the pastor who interviewed Hitchens: well, this resurrection stuff, we’re not expected to take that literally. It’s just a metaphor, it means don’t give up hope or something. So if you’re an optimist, you’ve already experienced the resurrection. That was one of the things dividing the Corinthian church that I mentioned last week. That’s why Paul is hammering the point home in this passage—it’s not a metaphor, it’s a fact. Here’s the gospel, Paul says in v 3: *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, He was buried, He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and He appeared to* hundreds of people, many of them still alive, go and ask them if you think I’m making it up. It’s not a metaphor, it actually happened even though it’s obviously hard to believe. If it didn’t happen, if Christ didn’t die for our sins, if He wasn’t raised from the dead, v 14 says, *our preaching is useless and so is your faith*. Paul’s wasting his breath telling you about it and you’re wasting your time even thinking about it as a metaphor. If it didn’t

happen, we're the most stupid people on earth, we're just a joke for getting together week by week to talk about it, to pray about it as though it were true, and to remember Christ's death using the symbols He gave us, the bread and the wine of His last supper.

But it did happen, Paul concludes in v 20. *Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.* And he goes on, in verses you can read in your Bible for yourself, to talk about what that means for us, which is basically that we, too, will experience resurrection, literally not metaphorically, that because of our faith in Christ death will have no power over us either. We will experience it, but only to move on to the life Christ came to give us, abundant life here and eternal life hereafter.

Paul's words address the issue troubling some Corinthians, and as I said last week today's churches have different issues. It seems to me that too many Christians today have the opposite problem from the one Paul is addressing: they believe their faith will give them eternal life one day, but they miss so much of what it gives us of abundant life now. I don't want anyone who attends St Peter's to be in any doubt about that: Jesus told us that He came that people might have life, and have it *abundantly*. It's in John 10, and it's in the middle of the passage about the good shepherd. *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for*

the sheep. I came that people might have abundant life, and I lay down my life for that. Christ's death is not only the key to eternal life in the future, it is the key to abundant life now, today.

Paul says, *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men;* let me draw this corollary: if for this life and for the life to come we have hope in Christ, we are to be envied more than all men. Envied, because then we truly are the person who has everything, not just all that life has to give, but all that God has to give. Remember the blessings that Jesus promised to those who follow Him: *they will be comforted, they will inherit the earth, they will be filled with righteousness, they will be shown mercy, they will see God, they will be called the children of God, they will be fed and clothed by God, ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you, your Father in heaven will give good gifts to those who ask him!* And those are just the things promised in three chapters of Matthew's gospel—there's lots more. Whatever you think of when you hear the words *abundant life*, that's what God wants to give you. That's what Christ's death makes possible for you. That's what He responds with when you put your faith in Him. Day by day your life changes, day by day it grows in abundance until one day you look back on who you used to be and you can hardly believe the difference. And a day eventually comes when you can't even

remember who you used to be. *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come*, Paul tells the Corinthian Christians the next time he writes to them!

If for this life *and* for the life to come we have hope in Christ, we are to be envied more than all men. But of course envy would be an even more stupid reaction than just hoping in Christ for this life, because no one need envy those who have new life in Christ, *anyone* can have it. That's one of the amazing things about God's grace, none of us will have any less of it even when everyone else has it too.

I like Hitchens because he is good at what he does, even if what he is trying to do is futile. And it is futile: most of his talks are debates with a Christian, and at the beginning he is charming, relaxed, witty, and convincing. He's usually that way at the end of the debate, because he's so much more articulate than the Christian he's talking to. But in the debate I put a link to on our face-book page, he is debating with someone who is as articulate as he is, an Anglican, I'm pleased to say, the head of one of the Church of England seminaries, and by the time it's over Hitchens is angry and agitated, wriggling in his seat with irritation because he has failed to make this Christian look silly. Watch it if you have the time; this is one debate he does not win, even though at the end he mutters, 'I won anyway'. He didn't, and ultimately he can't, because the

positive message of abundant life in Christ is always going to be more powerful than the negative message ‘there’s no such thing’, not because the positive message is positive, but because it really is true. *Christ has indeed been raised from the dead*, and He is ready to raise anyone who calls on Him, even now.

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