

Unlikely Paradise – Easter Day Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton
1 Corinthians 15: 1-11 John 20: 1-18 – 04/04/2021

Quick quiz question to start off with: what do these four have in common?

- a back street on the outskirts of Walsall
- the buildings above part of Birmingham's inner ring road
- some land next to Durham cathedral
- a city in California tragically burnt down in 2020



The answer, unlikely as it seems: they all bear the name of Paradise! The one you'll probably know is Paradise Circus in Birmingham (rebuilt since many of us were last there!) Most local is Paradise Lane in Pelsall. The Californian one no doubt looked like Paradise until that dreadful fire. In Durham, Paradise

was a place of burial for pilgrims who didn't quite make it to the shrine of St Cuthbert. Each of these places is 'paradise' to someone, even if it may seem unlikely to everyone else.

What is your image of paradise? The word comes from ancient Persian meaning a walled garden. Many of us are probably happy with that – we imagine peace, tranquillity and abundance, and when we put people into it, then laughter, relaxation and happiness. In the Bible, it's the Garden of Eden, where every part of God's young creation lives fully in harmony, and where the Creator walks, mingling with his creatures, in the cool of the day.

If asked why Jesus had to die, and what was achieved by his resurrection, the simplest answer may well be, so that we might enjoy paradise, using the word to mean heaven. A heavenly garden may be perfect for some, but rather dull for others. It's just your most perfect place. I'm reminded of how Christian writer and humourist Adrian Plass put it. When he asked what heaven is like, he was asked in turn, 'What do you most enjoy?' 'Cricket', he replied (noting in brackets that he wished he'd said something more spiritual!) 'Good. Then imagine you have just scored a century in a test match at Lords to win the ashes. How ever you would feel then, well, heaven is that feeling but a hundred times better.' Paradise!

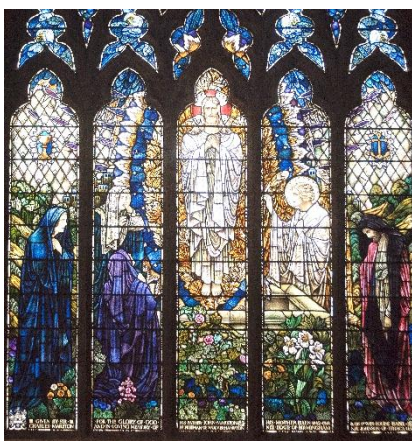
'Paradise' is only directly promised to one person in the Bible, the repentant criminal on the cross next to Jesus, the one who recognises his own guilt and then asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. And Jesus replies, 'Today, you will be with me in paradise.' It's an unlikely contrast of scene: the awful degradation of the three crosses of Calvary, set against the peaceful tranquillity of the perfect garden. And it's an unlikely promise: how can this man, undergoing the punishment designed to demonstrate his humiliation, promise anything? And yet there it is: the first one to paradise is a criminal! It is a wonderful and moving moment, one many of us believe expresses the heart of the Christian faith – that whatever past you have had, however badly things have gone wrong, and however late you have left it, there is forgiveness available even for the most unlikely of individuals: the way to paradise lies open.

That promise looks absurd on Good Friday, but three days later the ground has shifted. The Day of Resurrection is the demonstration that this most unlikely thing is true. If Jesus had promised paradise but stayed in the ground himself, it would have been an empty promise. But raised from the dead, these, and all his unlikely words, have authority. They are true. The resurrection was in itself utterly unlikely, utterly unexpected. At that time, no one planned for it; no one was ready for it; no one could make sense of it. Given how important the resurrection is, it may seem strange the Gospel writers did not tidy up their accounts. They all give different details. There are mix-ups of identity. Confusion reigns! But that very confusion makes it all so compelling. You can imagine yourself there – the early morning mist, the half-

risen sun. People coming tentative and fearful, then some running away, some running back, some hanging around. That's how people remember things – things so unlikely their brains can hardly compute. These stories have the feel of eye-witness accounts. Later on, the apostles clearly make the point about eye-witness testimony. Peter, in Acts 10, for example, tells Cornelius Jesus appeared before chosen witnesses who ate and drank with him. And Paul, as we heard in 1 Corinthians 15, lists the eye-witnesses: the apostles, Jesus' brother (James, who was previously sceptical of Jesus' claims) and at one point a group of 500 people. This is the testimony that was passed on, and kept safe, and recorded in the Bible for all generations to come. This, Paul emphasises, is what Christians have known and preached from the beginning. This news, that Jesus was truly risen from the grave, is the heart of what they'd believed, and the basis of the hope they had. If your hope is only for this world, Paul continued, then you have believed in vain.

However, we might add, if it is only for the world to come – future paradise – that we believe, our faith may also be in vain. Christianity is not mainly about death bed conversions and escaping judgment by the skin of your teeth. It is for today. 'Today' is another unlikely word Jesus spoke from the cross – 'today, you will be with me in paradise.' On that day both Christ and the criminal were nailed securely to their crosses and would stay there until they were securely dead. Jesus did not say, wait three days when I rise again, or indeed wait 43 days until I ascend to heaven. 'Today' has deeper meaning. Today is when God's eternity cuts into the human dimension of time. Every moment where God breaks in is a moment of 'today'. 'Paradise' is not only a future after death but unlikely – incredible – as it may seem, to be experienced now – even by a man still being crucified. At that moment Jesus spoke to him, he received forgiveness, he learned acceptance, he experienced love – and that is the breaking in of paradise – paradise now, that reaches completion in the world of tomorrow. Now, I wouldn't dare tell anyone in the middle of suffering illness, bereavement or other distress that actually they're in paradise; nevertheless, many of us do know that in reaching out to God in these moments something can change, and, looking back, we can call it God's 'today' coming into ours.

Two final pictures: Mary Magdalen met the risen Jesus in a garden. Why else would she have thought she was speaking to a gardener? The 'Garden Tomb' in Jerusalem (even though it is highly unlikely to be the right place) evokes the right sense of place. It just suggests a connection with the paradise garden. With Jesus raised from the dead, a new Eden is starting to break in. Do notice it's only the beginning. The rock of Calvary is still there. The landscape is still harsh. But flowers have started to bud and bloom, trees beginning to green. Sins have been forgiven. Death has lost its dominion. It's in the hands of these few witnesses to make the unlikeliest of events known to the world.



Finally, at Christ Church, our own glorious West window conveys both resurrection and ascension. It is misleading if you want to learn from it details of the setting in first century Palestine. But through its rich colours and blooming flowers, we get that sense of new creation bursting out. It seems highly unlikely, but paradise is here amongst us, even in the Parish of Tettenhall Wood! The challenge is to keep looking out in unlikely places, and discover the paradise of God which is for today and for ever.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!