

Resurrection Sermon (1 Corinthians 15:12-20)

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. St Paul makes it unequivocally clear that belief in the resurrection of the dead, both Christ's and our own, is a prerequisite of the Christian faith. And yet it is a doctrine we hardly ever talk about or ponder. Each week, as we say the last line of the Nicene Creed – *We believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come* – do we pay attention to its meaning; do we really know *what* it means; and do we even actually believe it?

Today's passage was written to the Christian community in the Greek city of Corinth; most of this letter's original listeners would have been pagan converts to the faith. Unsurprisingly, the concept of bodily resurrection was something these new Christians had great difficulty in getting their heads around. They would have been raised with Plato's understanding of bodies containing incorporeal entities, immortal souls that broke free after death, floating away to some other place; and Pythagoras's idea of transmigration, that souls could exist in more than one body, hopping from one human life to another. Hence, to the Greeks, a person's material body didn't have much to do with their identity; all of that was contained invisibly inside.

Yet Paul, knowledgeable about Greek philosophy and metaphysics, but brought up in the Pharisaic school of Judaism, would have believed in the resurrection of the dead his whole life. To him, Jesus's bodily resurrection pointed to our own future bodily resurrection, whereas to his Corinthian Christian brothers and sisters, it just confused them to the point of intense

arguments. But Paul holds the firm line that if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either and our whole faith is in vain.

Theologian Paula Gooder, a lay reader and Canon Chancellor at St Paul's, has written a wonderful book about all this that I'd recommend to everyone: it's called *Body: Biblical Spirituality for the Whole Person*. She writes:

Paul's argument about resurrection did not begin with the nature of our resurrection bodies but with Jesus himself. For Paul, Jesus' resurrection was the clinching argument that demanded that the Corinthians saw their own future beyond the grave in terms of resurrection. Jesus rose from the dead and so will they...

Jesus' resurrection was not an anomaly, or a one-off event. It was the start – albeit a very early start – of the resurrection of the whole of humankind. As a result, believing in our own resurrection is not something peripheral that we can take or leave depending on our personal choice, it is a central pillar of Christian faith...

If [the Corinthians] didn't believe they would rise they were effectively declaring that Jesus hadn't either. If they declared that Jesus had not risen then both Paul's proclamation and their own faith was meaningless.

I don't imagine this was difficult only for the Corinthians, but for many of *us* as well. I also regard it as slightly unfair. I have known plenty of genuine and faithful Christians who are unsure about the resurrection – myself included. After all, the notion of bodies rising up from the ground all over the earth (every human being that has ever lived!) on the Day of Judgement is rather frightening and not at all attractive or appealing. Though perhaps

this is largely down to the unhelpful influence of Zombie Apocalypse films and other lurid pop-culture images we are exposed to.

Yet still, we must wrestle with not only Paul's criticism of the Corinthians, saying: "How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?" but Jesus's own rebuttal of the Sadducees (the only Jewish sect that flatly denied resurrection and any concept of afterlife). "Jesus said to them, 'Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? ... As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.'" Strong words from both Jesus and Paul against those who deny the resurrection...

Resurrection is a central and defining teaching of all Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It distinguishes us from other major faiths of the world like Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism, all of which believe in some form of reincarnation or rebirth, more or less the same idea as Greek pagan transmigration. Or Taoism, Confucianism, and Shintoism – even further removed – venerating ancestors and believing in an interactive spirit realm. The notion of bodily resurrection is utterly bizarre to them.

None of these religions have a concept of end times, final judgement, or the body somehow outlasting this earthly, temporal life. To those faiths, spirit or soul (what is unseen and incorporeal) is good, and what is matter and physical is bad. Yet at the very beginning of Genesis, we read that when God created the earth – the land, the animals, human beings – *He saw that it was good*. If bodies are intrinsically good and holy in God's eyes, then it only makes sense that God's new creation will also include bodies.

However, thankfully, we are also clearly told that these bodies will not be the same bodies that are buried in the earth. A lot of Christians have a great deal of anxiety about not being cremated because they worry that they won't be resurrected, but of course this is silly. Resurrection bodies, we are told by Paul, won't be physical bodies, but spiritual bodies. Not the bodies we have now, but bodies (he says) clothed with immortality, imperishable like Jesus at the transfiguration, or after his resurrection when he ascended to heaven in glory. But to have a spiritual body does not mean to have an immaterial body – rather, as Kallistos Ware explains: When we are told to glorify God with our bodies or present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God – this 'spiritualising' of the body 'does not thereby dematerialise it: on the contrary, it is the human vocation to manifest the spiritual *in and through the material*. Christians are in this sense the only true materialists.'

In a world where the human body is something talked about more than ever: self-image, weight loss, gender and sexuality, disability, cosmetics (and where material is often a negative word) perhaps it's time now to consider (without bewilderment or embarrassment) just what it might mean to have a spiritual resurrected body. Not disembodied souls floating around in some ethereal plain; certainly not some kind of 'Dawn of the Dead', bodies rising up from the ground. But a new creation, new life, new bodies, 'like angels in heaven' as Jesus describes. And he wasn't even the first person to talk about the resurrection...

The first time in the Bible the concept of the resurrection concretely first appears is at the end of the book of Daniel. It's one of my favourite verses: *Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life ... Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead*

many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. That's something to look forward to, I think. Amen.