

Second Sunday of Easter

'I believe in the resurrection of the body
and the life everlasting. Amen.'

The last two lines of the Apostle's Creed which is said each day at Evensong and which so easily trips off our tongues. But do we believe it?

A few years ago now, I was asked to officiate at a funeral. The family were known to me and I was asked as a favour to take it. 'My wife is taking great comfort' said the husband, 'from the fact that her mother is now safely in heaven with God where she lives on.' 'That's OK I said, I would believe the same, what do you believe then?' This was someone who had been an ordinand. 'Oh I don't believe any of that', he said. 'I believe that she has died and that she has now been gathered in somehow into the great wealth of the love that is God.' 'Interesting', I thought and, reflecting on it later, I wondered to what extent that was real resurrection as we as Christians understand it.

Do you believe in the resurrection of the body? Or do you believe that it is the soul or the spirit that is raised? It's an interesting question isn't it, and if I asked for a show of hands as to whether people believe in the resurrection of the body or resurrection of the soul or spirit, I suspect that we would be in for an interesting result as well.

Separation of the body and the spirit is a sort of dualism, a distinction between body and soul, and certainly medical professionals these days treat people 'holistically', not as a gathering of symptoms, but as a unity of body, mind and spirit, in other words, the physical, the psychological and the spiritual. So, if we can identify two, or even three parts to ourselves, which of it is raised in the resurrection? Is there a separation between the physical and the spiritual? What does the Bible say?

In his great treatise on the resurrection as contained in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, St Paul states 'What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable....It is sown a physical body. It is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body'. This might seem to suggest therefore that there might be some sort of differentiation between the physical and the spiritual. Is there?

You may not know it, but the First World War had a profound influence on the theology of resurrection and the afterlife. What was experienced for the first time of course, was killing on an industrial scale - previously unknown. Every town, village and family was affected and it became unthinkable that, as the atrocities and horror of the war became known, and that, as those who died were in their teens, if not their early twenties, having had very little life at all - that it would be inconceivable to think that God in his infinite love and mercy would deny them resurrection in his eternal kingdom. But how did that work? For the first time, soldiers were being blown up in conflict, the body often could not be gathered together in its entirety, sometimes, unfortunately, there was no body at all, and so a new way of thinking had to emerge to incorporate what was going on and to reconcile it to theological thinking. And so the theology developed of a sort of spiritual resurrection, and it became widely accepted. It was after the First World War for example and the subsequent theology that had developed, that cremation of the body became more widely accepted as well. So are we correct to think in terms of just a spiritual resurrection?

The Gospels would seem to argue somewhat differently, that certainly the resurrection of Jesus was a physical event. In today's Gospel reading for example, Jesus appears to his disciples and they are afraid. Here is a clue as to the fact of Jesus' death and the reality of his physical resurrection. The disciples found it unbelievable that someone they knew well and who they saw die upon the cross and later laid in the tomb could be alive again. Fear therefore was the only natural response and they must have thought that they were seeing a ghost. But the gospels are quite specific. Here is no ghostly spirit, Jesus bears the marks of the crucifixion on his body and the gospels are keen to show Jesus engaging in necessary physical activity such as eating food which would not be possible for a ghost or spirit.

So are we any clearer? My own view for what it's worth is that, for resurrection to be of any significance, it has to be real. So where does that leave us in the debate concerning physical or spiritual?

For me a spiritual resurrection is sanitised and intellectually easy to accept. But there is something also not quite right about it. Perhaps for example, with the exception of people we know well and whose voices we recognise on the phone, so much of what we recognise as making us the person we are depends upon the physical. Without the physical therefore surely there cannot be real resurrection? There is a sense isn't there that life is not all nice and sanitised, and what appeals to me from the gospel accounts of the resurrection is that Jesus still bears the marks of crucifixion and suffering on his body. He is raised in reality bearing those scars. We too all have scars. They may be physical and visible to everyone, or they may be psychological or emotional. But they exist, they are there. And what I find appealing in the physical model of resurrection is that these scars become transformed, made perfect if you like in St Paul's theology of the resurrection.

So where does that leave us? Physical or spiritual resurrection? Does it have to be 'either/or' or can it be 'both/and'?

The traditional depiction of a country church surrounded by graves is beautifully evocative and pastoral. Those who lived their life hearing and believing in the resurrection of the dead within the church are laid to rest just outside it, awaiting the resurrection around the church itself which proclaims that resurrection. We live within time, but the life of God and the life of eternity therefore is somehow out of, or beyond time as we know it. What then does this mean for our resurrection?

For me, it means that, in a sense, at a funeral, when I commend someone into God's hands that resurrection has in a sense already taken place, the soul of the departed person is already safe in God's hands. But that is not the end of it, for we are told again by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 that there will be another resurrection, when the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised. This is sometime in the future, and we don't know and cannot know when, in God's time of eternity is the 'the twinkling of an eye' - but it means a final reuniting and restoration of body and soul, physical resurrection as shown by Christ. Here is ultimate consummation, here is real resurrection and for me, the theology works, resurrection is here and now and something far off the in future when the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised.