

The Resurrection of the Body **Easter Vigil 2017**

'Then we shall all have eaten thee' is not a quotation from the Gospels, nor even from St Paul, but from a rather grisly folk song that may have originated in mid nineteenth century Halifax.

The consequences of courting Mary Jane without a hat on need not concern us here, except for the rather interesting analysis contained in the last few verses. There the song asserts that that dead bodies are eaten by worms; that ducks eat worms and that we eat ducks. Hence the gruesome but rather triumphant conclusion

'Then we shall all have eaten thee'.

Where does the resurrection fit into this?

For much of its history the Christian Church has taken a fairly literal view of the resurrection. This was one of the reasons for a general ban on cremation until the twentieth century.

In favour of that prohibition it could at least be argued that even though the body decays in the grave yet the skeleton usually remains intact.

But except among the Eastern Orthodox cremation is now usual for Christians. So clearly we no longer expect the resurrection to be about a literal reassembling of the molecules of our earthly bodies. It means something else.

But although the church has taken the more rather conservative, literal view for many centuries, we do not find that in the scripture. Perhaps the classic passage is from Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he attempts to answer the Corinthians question, How are dead people raised? What sort of body do they have?

Paul's reply is that the body we have after death is in many ways quite different from the body we had on earth: imperishable rather than

perishable; glorious rather than contemptible; powerful rather than weak; spiritual rather than natural. (1 Corinthians 15:42f)

It is a fascinating concept, a spiritual body. Paul does not say we live on as spirit. We are raised from the dead and given a spiritual body. This is important. It reminds us that an essential part of being human is to have a body, that being human requires us to have a body. In writing this Paul was putting a distance between orthodox Judaism and Eastern religions. The Jewish faith had always been clear that the created world was made by God and was to be enjoyed and celebrated. The body was made by God. There were and still are other religions, and even unorthodox Christian sects which believe that the material world was second rate or even evil. Some sects even believed that the material world was made by Satan and the spiritual world by God.

Paul is having none of this. At the resurrection we have bodies. And although they are radically different from our earthly bodies yet they have a connection. He uses the image of a grain of wheat being buried in the ground. It dies and a new ear grows in its place. The new ear is much greater than the grain that died but as we would put it now, the DNA is the same. (1 Corinthians 15:36 ff)

So resurrection is about the body, not a disembodied spirit; but it is not a literal reassembling of the old body.

And Jesus clearly taught this as well. He was once approached by some religious leaders, Sadducees, who did not believe in the hope of the resurrection. They put before him a rather improbable scenario of a woman who married seven brothers in turn. This was based on the Jewish custom that if a man died childless his widow would marry the next unmarried brother in order to have the first brother's children through the second brother as it were.

They concluded this scenario with a triumphant question

At the resurrection whose wife will she be?

Matthew 22:27

We've got you now, they thought! They'd trumped him! Checkmate!
And if Jesus had taken a literal view of the resurrection he would have
been in trouble. But he didn't. And what he replied was

You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the
power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are
given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

Matthew 22:29-30

In my last parish a child at the local Roman Catholic school asked one of
the nuns

Will my dog go to heaven?

The reply of the nun was

If you need your dog in heaven, she will be there.

It was a wonderful reply. The child will have thought I do need my dog
and so she will be in heaven. Twenty years on the adult will now think, I
do not need my dog in heaven. But at the age of thirteen and newly
bereaved she could not envisage that possibility. In many ways we have
a similar view of heaven. We tend to see it as a kind of extension of
everything that makes us happy in this life, the relationships, the family,
the friends. In a sense we can do no other but we need to bear in mind
Jesus words to the Sadducees:

You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures
nor the power of God.

This idea of the resurrection body matters not only for our own
resurrection but also for that of Jesus. You see it helps make sense of
some of the oddities of the meetings between the risen Jesus and his
disciples:

- Mary meets him in the garden and assumes he is the gardener
John 20:15

- Two of them walk to Emmaus with him, hold deep conversations
but do not recognize him until he breaks bread with them
Luke 24:13 ff
- Thomas meets him face to face but will not believe it is Jesus
until he puts his hands in his wounds John 20:25
- Jesus walks in and out of locked rooms John 20:19
- He eats with them on the beach, the disciples know it is him but
do not dare ask him John 21:12

When I was about seven I used to worry that if I met Jesus I would not
recognize him. I can still see the vision of had then of him walking down
the street where I lived. He had a beard and a long flowing robe of the
kind that is ill seen in the middle east. And in Morrison's Thornbury.

I still worry that I might not recognize Jesus. It is a genuine concern.
But the Jesus in my vision is no longer dressed in first century middle
eastern clothes. The Jesus I may not recognize looks like a beggar sat
outside the Alhambra in Bradford on a Friday night. The Jesus I may not
recognize looks like a North Korean child; or a Syrian refugee trying to
cross Europe with her family; The Jesus I may not recognize looks like
the Governor of the Bank of England or the Prime Minister. The Jesus I
may not recognize looks like you.

What those first disciples discovered on Sunday was not that Jesus had
simply been restored to what he had been on Maundy Thursday. What
they discovered was that Jesus was now among them, with them, in
them. And Jesus told them that before he died when he told them the
parable of the sheep and the goats:

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who
are members of my family, you did it to me.

Matthew 25:40

Jesus was now among them, with them, in them.

And he still is.

N Clews
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