

Psalm 37

1 Corinthians 15. 35-55

Luke 6. 27-38

The Nicene Creed finishes with the words:

*We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.*

*We look for the resurrection of the dead,*

*and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

From time to time, I come across the view that an essential test of Christian “faith” is that one must believe in the bodily resurrection of the dead. The view is that to be an adequate person of faith, one needs to embrace this “belief”; without doubt. Anything less is inadequate, goes the view.

But the line - *we look for the resurrection of the dead* from the Nicene Creed strikes me as being a bit more nuanced than this. It’s not so much a statement of belief as a stance, an indication of a faith orientation. As Jesus encourages disciples to be watchful so the creed invites us to say *we look for ...* .

What we have heard from Paul are actually the first writings about the resurrection – the first writings about the resurrection by nearly two decades. Paul was long dead before Mark penned his Gospel, giving us the first account of events that morning on the first day of the week. So, we need to pay attention to what Paul is saying about the resurrection, particularly as he labels fools those who misunderstand its nature. The images he uses are complex – as Paul so often is – but the complexity of what he writes is a caution to us to not be content with insisting that a straightforward resuscitation of the body is all there is to say about resurrection.

A few years ago, I did a long course on Christian Mysticism encompassing the last two Millenia. To begin with we first explored ancient Jewish mysticism, then Jesus and Paul. Now, most of us probably don’t think of Paul as a mystic, rather a bit of a crank who is difficult to understand and is sometimes a bit objectionable; heavens, who calls their correspondents fools in order to get them to pay attention?

We can say Paul is a mystic because, as all mystics do, he struggles with language to say what he is trying to convey. The thing is there is usually no straightforward, everyday language to describe what we experience of the life of God and the spirit, so we often fumble, use multiple images to get our point across. In what we have just read Paul is trying to say something about the nature of resurrection, in the first such recorded writings about it that we have. Here he is writing, not so much about Jesus, but about how resurrection might be envisaged and experienced by these Corinthian believers he is writing to. So, let’s try reading him again, setting aside the images we have from the Gospels about the three-days-dead Jesus.

*There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.*

*So, it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus, it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.*

It might be helpful here to understand that for the ancients the significance of resurrection is not so much the bodily raising of Jesus as the glorification of him who was supposed to have been degraded, erased, disappeared by crucifixion. This is why Paul begins this passage: Some might ask: *How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?* Fool! He says so as to alert his hearers that this is not the issue.

Then he speaks of the glory of different kinds of bodies: of the glory of the sun, the moon and the stars, of heavenly and earthly bodies, to shift our minds from a concern with bodies to that of glory. Paul in trying to explain this 'raising-up' of Jesus (which is literally what the word resurrection translates) is concerned with reputation, glory (or otherwise) of Jesus in the eyes of his followers and the wider community. The shame of the cross was meant to erase Jesus' reputation by dishonouring him – but he was sown in dishonour, raised in glory, he was sown in weakness and raised in power. He was sown in a physical body and raised in a spiritual body. Hence he writes: , *'The first man, Adam, became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.*

So what Paul is saying is that resurrection is about spirit! Not body!

Here is the crunch for us when we wish to assert that resurrection is about a resurrection of the physical body. Paul's imaginative leaps of faith suggest that the life of God was sown in Jesus in the physical body and raised in a spiritual body. And here he makes the leap for we who believe; flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable – the mortal - inherit the imperishable - immortality. The perishable must put on imperishability.

This is the mystical reality of the Christian life, that in dishonour, in shame, in weakness, in all the ambivalence we feel about the lives that we live in our bodies we are at the same time are being raised in the spirit in same pattern as Christ.

In chapter 1 of this letter Paul writes: *But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God,*

This is what it means to be resurrected.

It strikes me that if we read resurrection in this way then it becomes clear that this is the pattern of the spirit of God which is readily available to us, indeed it is a pattern which is at play all the time in our lives and in the world. This resurrection business is not something that the church or Christians control, rather it is the spirit of God at work in the world raising people up to glory

from places of shame and degradation to be made 'joint heirs with Christ' as Paul calls the resurrected.

As people of the Gospel, as bearers of the good news, we are called to be people of resurrection, not being cowed by cultures of shame which degrade and dismiss people each day and seek to strip them of their dignity. Because we are people of the resurrection we can pass through these barriers of death in order to lift people to glory and wholeness. This is the nature and purpose of mission. To be bearers of the resurrection life.

The character of this being in the world, this looking for the resurrection of the dead is the character of mercy. It is the character which performs acts of love, which does good, which blesses those who curse, which prays for those who abuse and is unstintingly generous. This is the spirit which is characterised by resurrection, rather than a culture shaped by the sting of death.

Paul concludes: But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Which we may say too: Thanks be to God.

Andrew Boyle