

**Sermon preached at the Ecumenical Service to commence the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2012 – All Saints' Church, Dunedin, 17 May.**

Earlier this week I attended a talk at the University based on a survey into medical students' beliefs about 'the soul'. Both the talk and the research were fascinating, and I was particularly struck by a comment one respondent to the survey made concerning the effect that attending her or his first dissection of a body had on their thinking about life after death:

Before doing the dissection I was pretty firmly of the belief that there was no soul... [but]... After the first dissection, going home I couldn't help but wonder what happened after you died. It seemed weird that there was a lifetime of memories and movement and all sorts of other things that had happened in this body. And now, nothing. Surely it must have gone somewhere?

The business of 'what happens after you die' is something which many of us in the church, if we are honest, are quite vague about. And perhaps that's as it should be: death, judgment, heaven, hell – the four last things – are nothing if not a great mystery. But the Bible reading chosen by the Polish brethren and sisters who put together our resources for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity can shed much light on the topic for us. And very little of what that passage says, perhaps to the surprise of some, both within and without the church, is to do with the soul.

The astonishing claim at the heart of the gospel, which is given perhaps its fullest treatment in this I Corinthians passage, is that death will be overcome by a change *to* the body, not a release, as it were, of something *from* the body. 'The dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed', writes Paul in verses 52 and 53 of our key chapter (and I can never keep that glorious setting by Handel out of my mind whenever I read these words!). 'For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.'

It's all very *earthy* (and we need to read the whole chapter to get the full sense of this). Not much about the next world, a world to which departing souls or spirits might flee and make

their abode – but plenty about *this* world. And for Paul this is perfectly reasonable since, as he goes to considerable pains to explain in this chapter, our future ‘general’ resurrection is of a piece with the Resurrection of Jesus, that pivotal event upon which our very faith hangs. It is, in fact, one and the same event. ‘Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died’, Paul asserts in verse 20. Christ’s Resurrection, we might say, is an event out of history, an anticipation of our final destiny, a foretaste of the eschaton, the future fleetingly entering the present.

Paul explains that the Resurrection of Jesus is the event which gives us that hope without which (according to verse 19) we are of all people most miserable. The Resurrection is significant, too, in enabling us to make sense of our being here today as church, as inheritors of the faith of that small band of disciples shattered, dispirited and seemingly disempowered by the death of their Lord – but of course profoundly *re-inspired* by his post-Easter appearances, as the opening verses of our chapter describe.

But the Resurrection of Jesus also reminds us, as I have just tried to suggest, just how focused on *this* world our faith should be. Far from encouraging us to look to worlds beyond, the Resurrection suggests that God sees this world, not the next, as of prime significance. It is in our ordinary, earthly history, not some second order, more ‘spiritual’ history, that God’s heart lies. Just as Christ proclaimed the kingdom to be already among or within us, and taught us to pray for God’s kingdom to come, God’s will to be done, ‘on *earth* as in heaven’, so as followers of Christ, called to ‘seek first the kingdom’, our focus should be very much *here*.

Paul himself understood this when he wrote (in Romans 8) that it is this earth, this creation, that is waiting ‘with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God’, to be ‘set free from its bondage to decay’. So, too, did the writer of John’s gospel, which notes that it was *this* cosmos that God loved so much as to choose to identify with it by becoming incarnate within its history (John 3.16). John of Patmos pictures the end of things involving, not humanity fleeing to where God supposedly is, but the city of God coming down to be where

we are – a schema in which the hope of resurrection, as chapters 21 and 22 of Revelation make clear – is central.

I suggest that talk of escape from this world – though it may be better than being ‘left behind’ – can take our eye from the central challenge of the Resurrection. The Resurrection does two important, and connected, things: it vindicates the kingdom which Jesus came to announce, and it signals the defeat of sin and death – ‘death has been swallowed up in victory’; and thus it sets before *us* the challenge, because sin and death have been defeated, to concretize now the radical message of the kingdom, with its themes of peace, justice and inclusion – to do, in other words, some serious public theology. Indeed, Paul himself calls us to meet this challenge in the glorious conclusion to our passage: ‘therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the lord your labour is not in vain’.

In the light of the Ascension, which we particularly remember today, we might think that our context for doing this ‘public theology’ is one in which God is strangely absent. We remember today that awful moment when the disciples realized that they really *were* going to have to get used to rubbing along without him – just, of course as he had promised. As John 16 tells us, Jesus actually claimed it would be to the disciples’ *advantage* if he went away – but only because then the Advocate, the Helper, the Spirit, would come, as she did in a particularly dramatic way at Pentecost.

And the Spirit is also a present and inspiring reality for us today – which is why our context is one in which God is *not* absent, but very much with us. As Archbishop Rowan Williams put it in a reflection on the Ascension last year,

Jesus hasn’t gone away. He has gone deeper into the heart of reality – our reality and God’s. He has become far more than a visible friend and companion; he has shown himself to be the very centre of our life, the source of our loving energy in the world and the source of our prayerful, trustful waiting on God. He has made us able to be a new kind of human being,

silently and patiently trusting God as a loving parent, actively and hopefully at work to make a difference in the world, to make the kind of difference love makes.

So back to public theology again.

As we begin this Week of Prayer for Christian unity, with its emphasis on the change that Christ's victory over sin, death and the grave can bring to us, and to the world, will we commit to making a difference, as Christians and churches, to our neighbourhood, our city, our nation, our world? As we see so many places, not least here in Dunedin, where life needs to triumph over death, where justice needs to triumph over inequality and prejudice, where peace needs to triumph over conflict, where hope needs to triumph over cynicism, can we make a difference for good by our words and action? Can we help to bring, in tangible and loving ways, something of that 'life in all its fullness' which Jesus came to announce?

As those of us in public theology are always anxious to claim, we have within Scripture, and our various church traditions, a wealth of resources, insights, stories, narratives, teachings, which we can draw upon if, to borrow that beautiful expression from the book of Jeremiah, we want to contribute to seeking 'the welfare of the city', to making a positive and constructive difference. What we need is the will, the sense of purpose and the vision to use those resources, to make that difference.

As we commence this Week of Prayer, may we experience that unity of purpose and heart which will empower us to demonstrate, by word and deed, that God is indeed not absent in our world, that the victory of life over death upon which our reflections this week will focus, is a reality which all can know.

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