

## **Resurrection Sermon 3 Easter 2016**

1 Corinthians 15:35-58

In the final verses from St Paul's discussion of resurrection in his first letter to the Christian congregation in Corinth he deals with their reasons for denying the resurrection of Jesus the Christ and, because Jesus is the first of a general resurrection, the resurrection of the dead. As we hear of the reason why some in the Corinthian congregation denied the resurrection we will see that their reasons were remarkably similar to those expressed by many of our contemporaries. We will also see why accurately translating the nuances of one language into another is extremely important in order to understand an author's meaning.

What the Corinthians found to be objectionable about Paul's teaching on the resurrection was his insistence that Jesus' resurrection was a bodily resurrection and that the general resurrection of the dead would be a bodily resurrection – in Greek an *anastasis nekron*. Those Corinthians who denied the resurrection found the notion of bodily resurrection to be crass and embarrassing. They were not, it is important to know, denying the notion of there being life after death. But in their view life after death was a spiritual existence lived by an immaterial soul that had escaped the dead matter that was the body. Many people, Christian and non-Christian, even though they may not think about it very much, actually agree with this view.

Contrary to the opinion of some of the Corinthians Paul maintains that what is resurrected is a *material* body. But, almost immediately in his letter, Paul seems to contradict this assertion when he writes that what is raised is a 'spiritual body'. As I say this I can imagine some of you thinking, "gotcha, Paul *was* talking about some kind of immaterial thing being the thing that goes on after the body dies!" But this is not the case. Biblical scholars tell us that what Paul means is that the resurrection body is a 'spiritual body' not in the sense that it is made out of vapours, but in the sense that the transformed body, which includes a transformed brain, will act willingly and completely in accordance with the purpose of Christ. The resurrection body, furthermore, is designated a 'spiritual body' by Paul in the sense that it will be free of the decay and weakness that our bodies are subject to in this life.

When Paul speaks about the resurrection body he is not, it has to be stressed, talking about the resuscitation of corpses. Rather the concept of resurrection entails transformation into a new and glorious state. But, having said that the glorious resurrection body, according to Paul, has an organic continuity with the body that preceded it: this means that our present existence will not be annihilated. This is the point of two analogies that Paul uses - the analogy of the seed, and the analogy of putting on new and glorious clothes. The point that the analogy of the seed makes is that, although we take it for granted, it is pretty amazing that an acorn can become a magnificent oak tree. In our day we can make an analogy that was not available to Paul. In a cynical world we are still somewhat amazed that a fertilized egg consisting of a few cells develops into a baby. To sum up, then, Paul holds that the resurrection body is entirely outside our present experience but that it is, nevertheless, a *material* body. But what kind of matter will embody the resurrected? We cannot say except that it will be a transformed matter that, to quote one theologian, “will have exchanged its darkness, hardness, heaviness, immobility and impenetrableness for clearness, radiance, elasticity and transparency.” We are reminded by this poetic expression that our knowledge of matter is not complete as we in an earlier that discussed the notion of dark matter.

Having declared that resurrection as a bodily resurrection has an organic continuity with the material body that preceded it, Paul goes on to claim that the resurrection confirms the importance of bodily life now. This means that if the bodies of men and women will be transformed into resurrection bodies then it matters how we treat bodies now. The view that the essential part of us is a soul that leaves the body at death means that, ultimately, the way bodies are treated is not important. Throughout the ages bodies have been abused when they were regarded as not being essential to human identity. A case in point was the Spanish Inquisition that tortured the bodies of people in order to reform their sinful souls so that those souls would get to heaven. We can expand on this point.

If there is no resurrection of the body then it means that God has abandoned the bodies he created for us and had designated as being good. To affirm the resurrection of the dead is to affirm that God will make men and women whole and, thereby, affirm his creation as good. The resurrection, furthermore, reveals that death is a

destructive enemy that will ultimately be defeated by God. In this way the assurance of the resurrection becomes the foundation of our ethics. Because of the fulfilment and transformation of the bodies of men and women we must treat bodies in ways that are appropriate to the purpose and glorious resurrection that Christ's resurrection shows is our destiny. Each of us, if we think about it, will be able to see how this understanding of the resurrection as our future will shape the way we deal with bodies in the concrete situations our societies confront.

This concludes this series of sermons on the resurrection. What I have tried to show is that if there is no resurrection of the dead then there is no Christianity. I have also tried to make clear that the resurrection of Christ Jesus was an historical event. Finally I have to set before you what St Paul understood by a bodily resurrection.