

**Sunday May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

**1 Corinthians 15:35-46**

You might remember that a few weeks ago, when Brian was preaching just after Prince Philip had died, he called to mind some of the different images of the Duke that were then all over the media. The fair haired rather unhappy looking little boy in his short trousers; the handsome looking naval officer in wartime naval uniform; the more distinguished looking much more senior commander of later years; the aggressive, masterful looking controller of horses and carriages; the dignified senior citizen in never quite total retirement.

And then Brian asked: If we were to meet the Duke now in his resurrection appearance, which of those would he be?

And having raised the question, he then merrily went on his way, saying it was the job of some other poor chump to answer it when we got further into our series on 1 Corinthians 15. My friends, we are further in, and I am that chump. More of the Duke anon.

First, however, how did we get here? Here, once again, is 1 Corinthians 15, the story so far:

*First*, in verses 1-11, Paul makes the point that the resurrection of Jesus was a real event, in the real world. The story of the empty tomb, and the stories of the appearances, are not fancy symbolic ways of talking about something else – a private inner spiritual experience the disciples had, or their growing conviction that the values of Jesus lived on. No, says Paul. The resurrection happened in the real world, in a real place at a real time, with witnesses you can talk to. You're not saved by what happens inside your head or inside your heart, but by what God did in the real world.

*Second*, in verses 12-19, he underlines that this really is the bottom line of Christianity.

Remove the resurrection, and you don't really have a Gospel any more. Because the Gospel is that death is defeated, that the lost are rescued, and if Jesus is still in his tomb then they are not. Compared to this, nearly every other Christian belief no matter how true or how important is not *that* important, not *that* key.

*Third*, in verses 20-28, it's not just about Jesus. He is but the first fruits. The one in whom the floodgates opened, in whom and through whom life begins to surge into the whole world. He's like Adam, if you believe in Adam – just as all humanity was caught up in that first failure, says Paul, so shall all be caught up and made new in Christ. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive. And indeed not just humanity: in the end the whole world will be full of resurrection glory, and God will be all in all.

Because otherwise ... and this is the fourth stage, last week's reading - otherwise what? If the resurrection, Paul says, *isn't* true, if we just die and vanish, if life really does just decline and falter into defeat, won't that make a difference to how you live? If you really believe that you were made to be the image of God, to overflow with his grace and beauty and joy – and believe that because of Jesus that will really, truly happen – well, you'll at least want to live like that now. Even when you fail, you'll know where you're going. You'll understand that this life is but a dress rehearsal for glory. But if that's *not* the case – if this life is all there is, well, let us eat and drink, or perhaps do worse, for tomorrow we die.

That's the argument so far.

And then somebody asks the obvious counter-question. *But how are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?* Come on, Paul. It's all very well banging your drum so loudly, but have you really slowed down to think this one through? You say that we've got to believe in *resurrection*, and not just life after death, which is hard enough by the way, but resurrection. Something that involves the body, first of all Jesus' body, but also ours. These two arms, these two legs. You say that matter matters, that bodies have a glorious future ahead of them. And it all sounds strong and wonderful, but Paul, it is mad! Think about it. Which body will it be, for starters? The fit young one, or the old, decrepit one, or something in between? We might call it the Duke of Edinburgh question. And like your friend St. Luke, do you think this risen body is going to eat: a nice piece of grilled fish, say? And if you *do* think that, well then, what happens to the fish afterwards? Does it go down into a resurrection digestive system? Does it come out the other end? Will the Kingdom of God need a decent sewage system?

And it's all very well you calling me a fool, Paul. It's all very well you saying that these questions are disrespectful, or silly, or immature – you're the one who's hammering on about bodies! Unless, of course, you don't actually mean it at all. Unless, when push comes to shove, you're really using these words, these pictures as metaphors for something else. Unless after all this, you don't really believe in a *bodily* future, but some kind of spiritual life after death? That I could live with. That sounds a good deal more sensible. Is that what you mean Paul?

This kind of argument has been going on in the church since pretty much AD55, when Paul wrote this letter. These are not modern doubts, modern problems. And from the beginning, the Church has been very tempted indeed to agree with the suggestion I've just put forward, that *really*, when you push it, we don't *really* believe in bodily resurrection. In fact, that temptation has been almost overwhelming. And it has been strengthened by what must stand as one of the most unfortunate pieces of biblical translation ever, which comes in the second half of our passage this morning. According to the translation we use, and in fairness many others, Paul says that in the resurrection we'll have *spiritual* bodies – in sharp contrast to the physical ones we have now. *Spiritual* bodies: you can almost hear the sighs of relief as theologians decide they're off the hook for all those awkward questions about digestion and fingernails and haircuts in the resurrection life.

Unfortunately, however, it is a rubbish translation. When we hear the phrase 'spiritual body' we instantly think 'not physical'. That, to us, is almost what the word 'spiritual' *means* – not physical. Not so for Paul. He didn't have that sharp distinction between the spiritual and the material, and when he spoke of a spiritual body he did *not* mean something immaterial, non-physical. Remember, for him, matter *matters*. The empty tomb *matters*. God made all of reality, including the material, and intends all of it to shine with his glory. And that's what the 'spiritual body' is: the real body, the physical body, but now indwelled, full of, powered by the divine presence. Our present bodies are weak and failing. They've only got so much strength and energy in them, and it's running out fast. The spiritual body, the body that awaits us – it's still our body, but this time filled with God. This time, shining with glory. This time, incandescent with brilliance and beauty and joy. Your body now is a mere electric light-bulb. Then, it will be like the Sun.

So Paul would politely decline the option of making everyone's life easier by saying yes, after all, we don't really mean bodily resurrection. We really do, he'd say. We really do think matter matters, and always will. Human beings are physical, not just spiritual, and always will be. At which point, all those awkward questions are straight back on the table. Which Duke of Edinburgh will it be? What about the fish? Paul has refused the easy way out – but is there any other?

Well, says Paul, think of it this way. Imagine a seed. Say, for the sake of argument, an acorn. And now imagine an oak tree. Two more staggeringly different things it would be hard to imagine. And yet you all know that there is actual bodily continuity between them. For all their stupendous difference, they are in some sense the same thing. The acorn is risen into the oak tree. And so it is, says St. Paul, with the resurrection of the dead. When you have a funeral, the body you say farewell to is like a seed. Like an acorn. It's not yet the body that is to be. God will give it a body, as He chooses. And like the oak tree, that new body, the spiritual body, the shining like the sun body, will in some sense grow out of the old one, this one, the weak and dying one. In some sense it will indeed *be* that body. There is real continuity, set in staggering, stupendous transformation. So staggering, and so stupendous, that to try to bridge the gap now, to try and imagine now what our risen bodies will be like – well, that's a bit like acorns trying to imagine what it is to be an oak tree. We have but acorn minds. We do not have the mental equipment, the intellectual or spiritual capacity, to understand now what we will be then. Now we see as if in a glass, darkly. One day, we'll see face to face. One day, we'll know.

Which Duke of Edinburgh will it be? Speaking as one foolish acorn to another, my hunch is: none of them. He – we – will be changed utterly. We will, of course, still be ourselves. Whatever makes Philip Philip, and Peter Peter, will still be there. That's what God wanted, after all, real selves, real individual people, who love and are loved. The self will still be there, but changed: grown bigger and better and deeper and wider, grown more real, more solid, grown like acorns into oak trees. We will not be ghosts. We won't be thin, dilute, diminished versions of ourselves. We'll be *more*. That's what's really at stake in resurrection doctrine. As someone once brilliantly put it, if the Gospel is true, we are now but shadows of our future selves. If the Gospel is true, we are now but shadows of our future selves. My friends, it is true. We're on our way.

To the God our Father who makes it so, through the risen Jesus and his Spirit, be glory  
forever and ever. Amen.