

Over the last couple of weeks we've seen an amazing variety of images of Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. There's 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 naval officer of later years; the aggressive, masterful looking controller of horses and carriages; the dignified senior citizen in never quite total retirement. If we were to meet him now in his resurrection appearance, which of those would he be?

If we were to meet our daughter Helen in her resurrection appearance, would she be the occasionally troublesome and tantrum driven teenager with the aggressively pointing finger? Or would she be the confident 26 year old dendrochronologist we said goodbye to as she died peacefully 28 years ago? Or would she be the now 54 year old Helen that we've never actually met? Does she still have some version or other of that pointing finger with which she made it clear to the then vicar that if he wanted to come and visit her while she was ill that was fine by her but she wanted none of that prayer stuff, OK?

Because if Jesus really did come back to life after his death, and if our resurrection experience is anything like what we hear of his, then resurrection is, in some way, some kind of tangible resurrection of whatever it is that makes us recognisable here in this life. That's what Jesus is recorded as making clear in our Gospel reading from Luke chapter 24. "Look at my hands and feet" he says, "see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And then, as if to drive it home, he said "Have you got anything here to eat?"!

Of course, questions like the ones I'm asking are a complete and utter waste of time and intellectual energy if there never was a resurrection in the first place! Which is what, I suspect, indeed I know, a number of practicing church-goers, let alone the majority of church-avoiders would maintain if challenged to say what they really believe, rather than what they recite when they join in saying our Creeds.

2.

And they wouldn't by any means be the first! As Paul makes it clear, there were already in his own time Christians who couldn't bring themselves to believe in the resurrection of the dead, even of Christ himself! "How can some of you say" he writes "that there is no resurrection of the dead?" And even those of Paul's day, some 20 years or more after the crucifixion, were by no means the first to doubt it, as we were reminded in last week's sermon. According to Matthew's Gospel, even some of his own close disciples, the eleven who were left after Judas' suicide, had their own doubts even while they were actually worshipping him when he, apparently, appeared to them on a mountain in Galilee. Nothing new, then, in going through the motions whilst, at the same time, having serious doubts about the whole thing!

Just exactly what kind of form we might take in the next life, though, fortunately is not something I need to concern myself about at this stage. That will be someone else's problem when we reach verses 35-50 in a few weeks' time!

Of more concern for me today is where exactly does it leave us if there never was any such thing as resurrection in the first place?

Well let's start with the impossible, shall we? Because if there is no resurrection then, presumably, there is no God! Because if God and Jesus Christ are one and the same, which is what the Christian faith says – you know, the Incarnation, God becoming human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, 'of one being with the Father' as we'll be saying later – and if Christ died and that was it, no resurrection, then Christ is still dead, and if God and Christ are one and the same, then God, presumably, is dead and that's the end of the matter. And if there is no God, because Christ who is God is still dead, then as Paul said, we are of all people most to be pitied! But that does all sound far too much like a Terry Pratchett way of thinking, so I think I'd better leave that to one side for the time being.

3.

So where else shall we look? Well, if our salvation, that is to say our eternal life and return to the innocence and purity of life for which we were created, according to the Biblical record which we believe is a pretty good reflection over-all of the God whom we believe is revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth – are you with me so far?

If, as I say, our salvation is derived from the death and resurrection of Christ, and if there was no resurrection of Christ, just the death, then we no longer have what the Bible refers to as salvation – or, as Paul puts it, our faith is futile and we are still in our sins! So we might just as well have stayed in whatever frame of mind and behaviour we were in before we came to any sort of faith. I don't suppose most of us would have been very much different in terms of good moral life, care for others, lack of selfishness and general gentleness of attitude, but you never know. I suspect there's more than just the potential in all of us for the very opposite of those things we sometimes refer to as 'fruits of the Spirit'. Perhaps we might just take a fresh look at each other and, indeed, at ourselves, and reflect on what kind of people we might have been had it not been for the development of faith that has been taking place in us – a faith which, if there is no resurrection, is futile and a waste of spiritual conditioning.

I'll go further. If there is no resurrection, in whatever form that might take and whenever it might take place as far as we're concerned, then there is no new life as we understand the concept of life on the part of those we have all loved and lost, as the saying goes. So Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, or Helen, daughter of Pat and Brian, no longer exist, except, perhaps as some sort of amorphous non-entity in the vague and immaterial mists of non-time! Which means that every funeral service I have taken and every address I have given on such occasions has been not only pointless but based entirely on wishful thinking and therefore, to be honest, a downright lie! Which makes us, again, as Paul said, of all people most to be pitied.

4.

Which brings me to another point. If there is no resurrection, then not only have I been culpably guilty of misleading people and giving them false information, no matter how well-intentioned it might have been, I have been guilty, as Paul bluntly tells us, of actually misrepresenting God Himself! That's a huge burden to carry. It means that for nearly 61 years of ordained ministry plus however many years before that I was involved in teaching young people in the Kings Own Bible Classes in Aldershot and in Cambridge, I have actually not only been telling the kind of lies that should have made my nose even bigger than it currently is, much worse than that I have been totally misrepresenting the very God whose I am and whom I serve, as Paul put it to his companions when facing potential death by drowning. Now that's a huge burden to carry and an eternally serious charge to face, if there is no such thing as resurrection.

So if Christ is proclaimed, as I have proclaimed, as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? But then, perhaps that's not really what you do say after all. Perhaps what you say is more along the lines of:-

'I've no doubt that Christ was, somehow, raised from the dead; and I don't doubt that our lost and loved ones will, at some time and in some recognisable form, be raised to newness of life. I just say that the whole idea goes right against all logical and rational thinking and observation, but I just can't help believing it and accepting it in faith.'

If that is at-all close to what you say, then all I can say is 'welcome to the club'.