

Bedmond 15.04.18

When I conduct a funeral service I always try to reassure the grieving families and friends that just because the physical body has died that does not mean that the person whose body it has been has come to an end. Quite apart from my Christian belief in Christ and his resurrection, I find it difficult to believe that all those amazing processes that have gone into the making and forming of you and me suddenly come to an end when the body ceases to function. For the most part, the people I am talking to tend to agree with me; otherwise, I guess, they would not have asked for a Christian minister to conduct the service and would have opted for a Humanist leader.

What I have had to admit, though, is that I really have no idea what kind of existence the person whose body has come to an end now has, presumably for the rest of eternity. Just how 'physical' will it be? Is life after death a 'spiritual' existence'?

You probably realise that the Church generally has never been able to decide what kind of existence it will be. If you mostly attend Morning or Evening Prayer in the Church of England you will be joining together to declare your belief through the Apostles Creed, during which you will publicly declare your belief in the "resurrection of the body". If, however, you mostly attend the Communion Service you will be reciting the Nicene Creed, during which you will, equally publicly, be declaring, less specifically, that you "look for the resurrection of the dead".

Most of us have an idea in our minds that we will one day be reunited with those whom we have loved and lost; but if we have no 'body' as such, with what will we be able to register 'recognition'? I recognise you because I can see you, hear you, be aware of those endearing or thoroughly irritating things you do which distinguish you from other equally endearing or irritating people around you. I need eyes, ears and various other physical organs to identify your equally physical expressions. What if we no longer have such things when we're dead? How will we 'recognise' or be reunited with our loved and lost ones, especially amongst so many literally countless millions who have died since humanity first put in an appearance and the continuing countless millions who will put in their appearance in future aeons (always assuming we have any further future as a species!)?

All my faith education and theological thinking has encouraged me to think that the resurrection of Jesus shows us that physical death is not the end, that death has, as it were, been 'conquered'; but I am also encouraged to think that his resurrection is the prototype of all further resurrection; that we shall, one day, be 'like him'.

The Gospel writers quite clearly present us with a picture of resurrection appearances that do have a strongly 'physical' nature. Matthew tells us that those women who first learned of his being raised 'took hold of his feet'; you can't hold feet unless there are feet to be held.

Mark offers no such physical manifestations; but Luke is quite clear. The Jesus who appears to the two disciples walking to Emmaus walks and talks with them even walking on ahead of them when they reach journey's end. You can't do that without feet and vocal organs and there's no implication that he 'floated' rather than walked. Not only that but he sits 'at table' with them (difficult to do without a corporeal bottom to sit on!) and breaks bread, something for which surely you need hands? Later, in the incident we heard about in our Gospel reading, he actually says that he is not a ghost! "Touch me and see" he says, "a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have". Admittedly Luke does not actually tell us that they did touch him, but in case we have any doubts he tells us that Jesus then asked for something to eat and that he actually ate the broiled fish they offered him. To be able to eat broiled fish you surely have to have mouth, teeth and digestive organs.

John takes it even further. Mary Magdalene has a conversation with him thinking him to be a gardener – which seems to imply a distinctly physical appearance – and is then told not to touch him – a word which often means 'hold on to'; there seems little point in telling someone either not to touch or not to hold on unless there's something there to touch or hold on to! After that, John has him making and lighting a charcoal fire and cooking a fish breakfast for seven of his disciples.

If those Gospel writers are to be believed, Jesus rose from death with a body that was different enough to be not immediately recognised and to be less restricted in physical movement than normal - possibly even appearing through locked doors for example; yet familiar enough to be touched, hugged and enjoy a good meal with.

So what kind of body, if any, will our daughter Helen have in resurrection mode? Will she be 26, the age at which she died, or 51, the age she would be now had she continued to live? Or will she be somehow 'ageless'? Will she have the colour hair she had as a child or will it be the colour she insisted on dyeing it whilst undergoing chemotherapy? Will she still point her finger in the sternly fierce way she used to or will there be other characteristics by which we will recognise her? These are the sort of questions I can't help asking myself, as do, I suspect, those people at whose family funerals I give that reassurance about life after death.

And do you know what the Apostle Paul calls those of us who ask such questions? Fools! Never one to hold back from saying what he thinks, this is how he puts it to the readers of his letter to his fellow-Christians in Corinth:-

"But someone will ask 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' You fools!" He then goes on, at some length, to expound his view that there are different kinds of 'bodies' and that the body we will have on resurrection will be a different kind of body from the one we have in life. In his dramatic style he puts it in

words now familiar to us when put to music by Handel:- “For the trumpet will sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptable, and we will be changed!”

Well I don't know, and I guess you don't either. I'm still prepared to be the fool Paul says I am for asking such questions, but I'm not going to be obsessed by it. If Jesus' resurrection is to be thought of as some sort of prototype of our own afterlife existence, then I'm still going to be recognisably me but significantly different (you'll be pleased to hear!); and Helen is still going to be recognisably Helen, but significantly different. If we somehow come across each other we shall know each other – though, of course, we do rather assume that those we've loved and lost actually do want to be reunited with us! It could well be that they had quite enough of us in this life without finding themselves with us all over again for eternity!

In the end – if you'll pardon the phrase – what really matters is the assurance we have from the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus that this life is no more than a brief period in the eternity of our existence and that what is to come will be free from all that makes this life, at times, more difficult than we feel we can cope with.

Oh yes, and perhaps most important of all, because of that life, death and resurrection of Jesus, it will be an existence lived in the sunshine of total and utter forgiveness and acceptance by God, for me, for you, for Helen and for everyone we have ever loved and lost.

Amen to that.

Brian Hibberd