

All Saints 2021

One of my students has just completed a masters' dissertation entitled. 'What do those involved with funeral ministry within the Church of England think "happens to us" when we die?' I'm pleased to say that she got a well-deserved high mark.

Her dissertation built on some research findings of my own that indicated a lot of variability in the beliefs of clergy, and quite a lot of doubts and uncertainties. Both she and I found that it wasn't so much that clergy don't believe in the loving purposes of God and the reality of eternal life; it's just that we often seem to tie ourselves in knots when confronted with the history of Christian doctrine and the words of the funeral service, including the Bible passages that form a part of this.

On top of that we have to come alongside people who are grieving loved-ones and offer comfort in a form that makes sense to them without departing too far from orthodox Christian teaching about the resurrection. In times when people think the deceased has turned into a butterfly or is floating on a cloud somewhere up in the sky strumming on a harp, this can be quite a challenge.

Our readings set for today are a good example of the confusing concatenation of voices that we can be faced with when trying to make sense of the question of life after death, each one offering its own angle.

Interestingly, we don't have an Old Testament reading and this is perhaps because the people of ancient Israel didn't believe in life after death, but simply a kind of half-existence in Sheol, the land of shades. That's one reason why the psalms are so preoccupied with justice and vengeance here and now; for the psalmist this life is all that we have.

In the period between the end of the Old Testament and the time of Jesus, Judaism became very influenced by Greek culture and thought, and educated Jews started to entertain the idea of the immortality of the soul, something that they had taken on from Greek philosophers. Our reading

from the Book of Wisdom, which dates from around the time of Jesus and was probably written in Alexandria is a good example of this, and its account of life after death owes a lot to Plato.

Palestinian Jews, on the other hand, developed the idea of bodily resurrection. You may remember that this was a controversial idea; the Pharisees believed in it and the Sadducees did not, and on one occasion they asked Jesus to adjudicate between them. He came down on the side of the Pharisees but he also gave a rather enigmatic answer, '...in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.' (Note he didn't say they would become angels and go to heaven)

Those who did believe in the resurrection thought that it would happen all at once, some time in the future and that it would mark the end of this present age. In John Chapter 11, just a few verses before our Gospel reading Martha says this very thing to Jesus, "I know that Lazarus will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

If we turn to our reading from Revelation it doesn't look like Lazarus would have to rise very far because instead of him going up to heaven, heaven will come down to him in the shape of the new Jerusalem that will renew this earth.

The book of Revelation is an account of a vision. It's a vision of an alternative reality, one in which the corrupt powers that govern this world have been shown up – revealed - for what they really are and judged accordingly. The writer, John of Patmos, was primarily thinking of the Roman Empire but we can, I am sure, come up with some present-day equivalents.

John's vision is for a future time when the creation that has been despoiled is liberated and made new. It's a vision of God's kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven.

And the astonishing thing about Jesus, the thing that blew the minds of the first Christians is that this visionary future reality becomes an embodied present reality in him. In Jesus God's kingdom comes; in Jesus God makes his home among mortals, in Jesus God weeps with us and wipes away our tears; in Jesus God has a body and God cares about the bodies of every human being, bodies that smell in life and putrefy in death, as the Gospel reading makes clear.

In response to Martha's statement about the general resurrection in the future Jesus says "**I am** the resurrection and the life." It's me and it's now. And, after the raising of Lazarus he goes forward to his own death and bodily resurrection. This vindicated all those who had argued that death is not the end, and that we are not immortal souls but resurrected bodies. And it thrilled them because they realised that with Jesus the new age must have arrived.

Why are bodies so important? The old words of the funeral service, quoting Saint Paul, include this weird phrase, 'He shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body'.

It's easy to get the wrong idea about this and think that it's referring to something out of that TV show 'Embarrassing bodies' or its even worse spin-off 'Embarrassing fat bodies.' Over the centuries Christians have had negative attitudes to the physical body – seeing it as the origin of sin, being deeply ashamed of our physical embodied nature. We've tried to subdue or deny many of our natural bodily instincts which we have construed as sinful desires. The relentless succession of recent revelations

about abusive practices carried out under the cover of the Christian religion are the price we have paid for this misunderstanding.

But what the biblical writers meant by the body is quite different. This is especially the case for Paul whose concept of the body was influenced by the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca. For them both a body is something that has a structure and a capacity to act. It's an organisation that has agency. It is material, but not so much in the sense of being made up of physical matter but more in the sense of being concerned with what matters. So, the change that God is working in us that begins in this life and continues into the life to come is to make what matters to us align with what matters to him.

This understanding of the body is where we get our idea of the corporate from: the body politic or the body of the nation. And notice that in the funeral service it is not our vile bodies, but our vile (better translated humble) body. We are all in this together. It's not about me, but about us.

This week one of our grandsons was staying with us. He's five years old. We were playing a game of opposites. What is the opposite of 'Tall?' of 'Big?' of 'Light' we asked. He was quick to give the correct single-word answers. Then somebody asked him, 'What is the opposite of friendly?' He thought for a moment and then invented a compound word, 'All-by-yourself.' It was a deeply touching moment.' All-by-yourself'.

Whenever I talk to people about death and bereavement one theme comes up again and again: being separated from our loved-ones and from the broader community, feeling lonely, being alone.

This, you may recall, is the first thing in the Genesis creation narrative that God describes as not good. 'It is not good that the man should be

alone.' This is what matters; this is the matter. Christians believe that whether in life or death we are part of a faithful, if humble, body that is being transformed from one degree of glory to another.

And this is why the communion of saints is so important; those who have gone before, who join with us as we worship God in the words of the Sanctus around the communion table. Jesus is quite clear about this, 'as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is God not of the dead, but of the living."

As we pray with those who have gone before, the past is drawn into the present, heavenly realities touch this earth, the New Jerusalem descends and God is with us.

This was the thing on which all the vicars in our research agreed: We may not understand all the nuts and bolts, but this we know. In Jesus God's love has conquered death and even in our darkest solitary places we are not all-by-yourself because he is with us.