

3rd Sunday of Easter

From the earliest times human beings have wondered about what happens after death. Prehistoric cave paintings, and items left in graves suggest some kind of awareness of another world and hope for the future. St Luke was writing for Greek speaking communities and philosophers such as Plato believed that the human soul was immortal, but saw the body as a prison from which death released us. Others throughout history have thought this approach nonsense. After all, we are not just souls or psyches or minds. We are living, breathing, embodied spirits, laced together with memories, sensations, commitments, gender, relationships, and intelligence. All these elements are part of our identity. If these do not survive death, what does it mean to say that the soul is immortal? This leads many philosophers today simply to dismiss the possibility of any kind of continuing existence. Jehovah's Witnesses take a similar position. The dead are dead – full stop. At the end of time God will simply recreate us from the dust.

Christians, and the Pharisees of Our Lord's time, though not all Jews, believed in something quite different – the resurrection of the dead. God raises us to new life in our human bodies. We maintain our human identity throughout. The encounter on the road to Emmaus prepared the disciples for something even more powerful. While the disciples who had returned from the road to Emmaus were explaining how they recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread, Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst. Frightened, they thought they were seeing a ghost, but Jesus told them to look at his wounds and even touch him. He knew they were having trouble believing what was before them. As if to convince them that he was somehow, albeit strangely, flesh and blood, he asked for something to eat in their presence. "A ghost does not have flesh and bones as I do."

Either it is bunkum – lies and deceit – or it is true. This is the Jesus they had known. He would take food and allow himself to be touched. Even his wounds could be examined. It was a recognizable and identifiable Jesus, a realization of his bodied existence. And yet there were differences. He would appear out of nowhere, supposedly pass through walls and closed doors, walk on water, and reveal wounds startlingly different from the open sores of earthly trauma. The immortality of the soul is a kind of bridge between these two states. God is outside time. Time is a measure of change, like distance, that applies only to the material world. Although from our perspective there is a break between the moment of death and the general resurrection at the end of the time, no such gap exists in the realm of the spirit.

St Thomas Aquinas suggests that we, like Jesus, will have a new bodied existence, truly related to our bodies in this world, but nonetheless freed from their organic disabilities – our potential fully realized even if we died young, fully supple if we died old and frail, capable of every bodied joy, and gloriously transcendent over every wound in the body. This is why the New Testament speaks in terms of a new heaven and new earth, a heavenly Jerusalem with the light of God replacing that of the sun, a paradise garden restored and not of Nirvana – some kind of being dissolved and absorbed into God or of rebirth as part of an endless cycle of being. Our Lord's wounds are an invitation to faith not only in his resurrection but our own..

In his Divine Comedy, the poet Dante puts these words on the lips of Solomon:

'When the cloak of the glorious and holy flesh shall be taken on again, our person will be more pleasing by being fully complete.'