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DISEMBODIED SPIRIT OR RE-EMBODIED PERSON?

Trinity Sermon, No. 29

PROFESSOR M. A. JEEVES

DISEMBODIED SPIRIT OR RE-EMBODIED
PERSON?

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at

HOLY TRINITY CHURCH, ADELAIDE

Trinity Sermon No. 29

Christian doctrine of the resurrection be your INSPIRATION, knowing that the personality that you are forming now is not to be cut off at death, nor to become a disembodied spirit, but that it is to be re-embodied with a spiritual body as that which has been SOWN INGLORIOUS is raised IN GLORY.

And FINALLY .. "Know also, my beloved brothers", says Paul, that "IN THE LORD YOUR LABOUR CANNOT BE LOST".

To turn one's back on the gracious invitation of our Lord to "Come unto Me" is to suffer eternal loss. To accept that invitation is not only to receive forgiveness here and now, but is to be set upon a road which, whilst it will involve trials and difficulties throughout this earthly pilgrimage, nevertheless has the assurance that "The Lord is not unrighteous, that He will forget your works and labours of love" (Heb.6 v.10), for He has said .. "You shall be recompensed at the resurrection of the dead" (Luke 14 v.14), and at that time "Not even the giving of

As you stand in front of the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens you may look down to your left and not far away see the doorway in the rock face which guards the entrance to the cave in which, according to tradition, the great philosopher Socrates committed suicide. Over to the right you look down on Mars Hill where the apostle Paul came across the altar with the inscription 'To the Unknown God', and where according to Acts, Chapter 17, he was given a polite hearing until he spoke of the resurrection of Christ and then we are told in v.32 "When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked and others said "We will hear thee again of this matter".

The reason I mention these two places which stand so close together up on the Acropolis is that whilst they stand in such close physical proximity they nonetheless stand in stark contrast in another respect. You see at the death of Socrates his friends gathered round him filled with sadness at the impending departure of their intellectual leader, whilst Soc-

rates, believing like many Greeks that his soul was imprisoned in the temporary dwelling of his body, looked forward to the release of his soul from its earthly prison, when it would return to the spirit world whence it had come. The Apostle Paul on the other hand proclaimed not a belief in the inherent immortality of the soul, but rather the resurrection of the person to a new and spiritual body.

Socrates could face death with equanimity because according to his beliefs he was immortal, he possessed an immortal soul, a soul which does not die, but simply lives on. By contrast with the serenity of Socrates we must remember that Jesus underwent death in all its horror not only in His body, but also in His soul, and thus through His own death he conquered death itself. His victory would be an empty victory if he simply lived on as an immortal soul and thus fundamentally never did die at all.

Now why do I dwell on this at all? I do so because I believe that if you were to ask the average

TO "quit ourselves like men"
(1 Cor.16 v.13)

TO "run on with patience, looking
unto Jesus, the Author and the
Finisher of our Faith"
(Heb. 12 v.1,2)

for HE it is who is the FIRST FRUITS
of the RESURRECTION, and as we
trust in HIM, so we know that we
shall be part of that great harvest
of those who one day will put on
spiritual bodies in exchange for
these present corruptible earthly
bodies.

"THEREFORE ALSO MY BELOVED
BROTHERS, "work for the Lord always,
work without limit". The Lord
has given every Christian believer
a work to do, and he therefore ex-
horts us "Give thyself wholly to
it" (1 Tim.4 v.15)

"Forget all that is behind, and
press forward for that which is
before". (Phil.3 v.13).

Seek to "Abound in the work of
the Lord" (2 Cor.8 v.7), "Never be
weary in well-doing". (Gal.6 v.9),
and in all these things, let the

ing a steadfast adherence to the Faith.

SECOND, by a diligent performance of our Christian duties

and THIRD, by looking to an assured expectation of the reward which is ours by God's grace.

"THEREFORE, MY BELOVED BROTHERS, STAND FIRM AND IMMOVABLE" says Paul the realist. Reminding us that any presentation of the Christian life as if it is all a bed of roses is nothing but gross deception -- there WILL be temptations from without, there WILL be conflicts and trials within ourselves; there WILL be ups and downs in our Christian lives, but if we set our sights on the goal that is set before us, then we shall take heed to the need to "be steadfast and immovable" ..

TO "Hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering" (Heb.10 v.23)

TO "fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim.6 v.12)

churchgoer, or even well-read Christian today what he conceived to be the New Testament teaching concerning the fate of man after death, with few exceptions you would get the answer 'The immortality of the soul'. And yet this widely-accepted idea is one of the greatest and most widespread misunderstandings of Christianity.

You see, if you take seriously the repeated New Testament teaching which links matters of death and eternal life directly with the life, death - and rising again of the Lord Jesus Christ, you will discover that for the first Christians the soul is NOT of necessity intrinsically immortal, but rather became so ONLY through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and through faith in Him. It also becomes clear that death is NOT, as it was to Socrates and many Greeks, intrinsically the Friend, but rather, as the Apostle Paul says, it is an event with a STING, a power that is taken away ONLY through the victory of Jesus over it IN HIS DEATH.

In view of this widespread

misunderstanding, and having in mind the heavily materialist outlook of our generation, I should like to share with you some of the things the Apostle Paul has to say about resurrection and immortality in Chap. 15 of First Corinthians.

As you study this passage you at once sense the atmosphere of thought which was prevailing at Corinth, and which prompted the Apostle to such a thorough going and dramatic exposition and defence of the Christian belief in the resurrection, and not just the resurrection, but the resurrection of the body. Within the circle of the church at Corinth there were those, who for a variety of reasons, had begun either to cast doubt upon the truth of the resurrection or to outright deny that Christ had been raised and that those who have died in Christ will ever be raised. Being Corinth, and remembering Paul's experience not far away on Mars Hill, it is very likely that some of the Greeks, insofar as they held any belief in immortality at all, thought of it as taking the form of disembodied spirits, whilst others had really

steadfastness and new incentive to consistent and faithful Christian living NOW .. Therefore, my beloved brothers, stand firm and immovable, and work for the Lord always, word without limit, since you know that the Lord your labour cannot be lost".

So, says Paul, in the last verse of this Chapter, THEREFORE certain things follow. This is just like Paul, to finish on this practical note. Paul never gives us spiritual truths just to titivate our intellects. Paul always shows how spiritual truths are given because they can and should affect our walk and witness here and now. What is it then that Paul wants to leave with us of practical application arising out of what he has just taught us about the Christian doctrine of resurrection to a body, as contrasted with the pagan ideas concerning disembodied spirits? I think he is saying three things. He is saying .. Let the expectation of the triumph and victory over death which awaits every Christian believer have three effects NOW .. let it move him NOW to prepare for it .. FIRST by show-

that Jesus Christ was God incarnate and that in Christ on the Cross God did reconcile the world to Himself and more than that, that he bore the curse and penalty of their sin in His Death. So, he says, for you, YOU can replace philosophical speculations about immortality of the soul and disembodied spirits, by the FACT of CHRIST'S RESURRECTION. You can replace the shifting sands of dependence upon philosophical arguments BY THE FACT OF CHRIST'S RESURRECTION. You can do without the illusory belief in death as a welcoming friend. YOU can acknowledge the sting and power that once it had, because in Christ's resurrection you have overcome all that - for he says, "Death is swallowed up; victory is won!" .. "Oh death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and sin gains its power from the law; but God be praised, He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ".

And with all this in mind there is a final note of encouragement, for when you let these truths grip you you will find new courage, new

never thrown off the view of the Mars Hill audience who began to mock when he spoke of the resurrection of the dead.

In the face of such subversive teaching the Apostle emphatically declares first of all, that there are still alive a company of those who met, yes, and ate with and touched the risen Christ and secondly, that he can testify that the same risen Christ appeared to him, Paul, on the Damascus Road. The Apostle then hurries on to develop his argument with some of his most devastating and penetrating logic. Look, he says, IF there is no resurrection -

THEN in the first place Christ is not raised, and

IF Christ is not raised,

THEN the Gospel is an empty farce and your faith is nothing but an illusion.

Moreover, BY IMPLICATION

- We, the apostles, are liars
- Your sins are not forgiven
- And you can take it that your own loved ones are utterly lost through death, and you will never see them again.

In fact, he concludes all in all, we are a pretty pitiable crowd .. So you see, he says, this is a fundamental issue. BUT, he goes on, BUT, thank God this is all rubbish, because HE IS RAISED, and because He is raised it is most important that you should be clear JUST WHAT THIS MEANS. The Apostle realises that there will be those who will ask, if the dead are raised, how are they raised? And from vs. 35-57 he leaves no stone unturned to explain what the doctrine of the resurrection of the body means. He does this by concentrating upon two important contrasts with the prevailing views which his readers were contending. FIRST, he says the Christian doctrine is a doctrine of RESURRECTION not of IMMORTALITY .. it is a doctrine of continued EMBODIMENT, not of DISEMBODIED spirits ..

SECONDLY, the Christian doctrine of the resurrection teaches the continuance of personal identity, NOT reincarnation or any idea of absorption into the being of some infinite spirit.

Now let us consider these two

the life to come and the conditions of inheriting eternal life. It does not call men to a mere survival of death while they remain very much what they were before, but to a resurrection to a new order of being, of which the chief characteristic is fellowship with God".

In the rest of this Chapter, that is vs. 50-58 inclusive, the Apostle shows his readers how this Christian doctrine of the resurrection to a body, when properly understood, is far superior to philosophical speculations about the inherent immortality of the soul. Thus in v. 50 he states categorically that "flesh" and blood", that is man without the intervention of God, can NEVER possess "the Kingdom of God"; that his perishable body with its natural state of "souliness" can never of itself, and because of any inherent qualities, possess immortality - only an act of God, a re-creative act of resurrection, can effect such a transformation. And since he is writing to Christians and for Christians, there is the implicit assumption that these are men and women who have believed

Christ. His work is the spiritual regeneration of men and women, who though born or 'sown' as souls, yet accept Him as Master and Lord. They are His, they belong to Him. Slowly but surely their habits, desires and thoughts take on a new quality of Christlikeness. They are the spiritual beings who will be endowed in the resurrection with a spiritual body that corresponds to their new spiritual nature. All the more important is it then that we who put our faith in Christ should realise that we are now being fashioned, slowly it may be, but surely, "with many a labour, many a sorrow, many a tear", into Christlikeness. We who were created in the "image of the man of dust", are being fashioned "in the image of the man of heaven", the greatest of all personalities. We are slowly being conformed to His likeness. The fellowship begun on earth will with still more glorious consequences in the realm of personality and character, be continued in heaven. Archbishop Temple puts it thus ...

"The stress in the New Testament is all laid upon the quality of

contrasts in more detail as the Apostle sets them before us here and see what we may learn from them. In vs. 36-41 Paul makes it clear that man's hope of survival depends not upon the inherent immortality of his soul, but UPON AN ACT OF GOD. THE CHRISTIAN'S IMMORTALITY IS INVOLVED IN HIS RESURRECTION, NOT HIS RESURRECTION IN HIS IMMORTALITY. There is nothing in Paul's writing, nor in the New Testament, to suggest that the soul is inherently immortal. Indeed, the Apostle in this passage is surely taking up and amplifying the clear teaching of Jesus himself. He, you will recall, when speaking of the purpose of His Life and Death, taught that "He that heareth my Word and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death into life" .. and later in the same passage, as he speaks of a coming judgment, He says quite explicitly .. "The time is coming when all who are in the grave shall hear His voice and come forth; those who have done right will be raised to life; those who have done wrong will be raised to hear

their doom".

Thus the Apostle teaches that just as there is a body given and appropriate to this life, to the here and now, so there will be a body given and appropriate to the life to come. He teaches moreover that just as the Gospel itself is based on God's initiative, as spiritual gifts are the endowment of God, as the resurrection of Jesus is a mighty act of God, SO ALSO the resurrection of the body of His believers is a mighty act of God and His gift. In setting out his reply to the questions which had been raised, the Apostle uses a series of analogies and contrasts, all aimed at reinforcing his central point, namely, THAT THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY IS AN ACT OF GOD, and A GIFT OF GOD. First he uses the analogy of the seed, and here his main point is surely that the seed though planted and, in a non-scientific sense dying, nonetheless lives on in a transformed but recognizable further stage of existence. Thus he says in v.38 "God gives the grain a body as He has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body".

most important for them, He was the same wonderful Friend and Lord they had known in Galilee and Judaea.

These points of personal identity retained, yet embodiment radically changed, he reinforces and emphasises with a series of contrasts in vs. 42-44.

You see, he says, you are ..
sown perishable - raised imperishable
sown inglorious - raised in glory
sown in weakness - raised in power
sown physical - raised spiritual

Thus it is the soul, the non-spiritual personality that is sown but it is the spiritual man, "THE NEW CREATION" in Christ that is raised. And this spiritual body will ensure his full, continued, distinguishable personality. I realise this is all difficult to express, but Paul's intention is clear enough. The spiritual body is for those who truly and sincerely put their faith in Christ and are thus transformed from 'souliness' to spirituality. All this they owe to the redeeming power of Jesus

all, thought of it as taking the form of disembodied spirits. Paul contradicts both views and puts forward his own inspired view.

Notice that Paul in contrasting the physical body and the spiritual body, believes that the resurrected body will be appropriate to its new, glorified mode of existence and will preserve everything that is essential for recognizable personal identity. No doubt in writing this he had in mind all the marks of personal identity reported as being seen in the risen Lord Jesus. Thomas was insistent on identifying His crucified Master by nailprints and the spear-wound, and was overcome when given the opportunity to do just this. Jesus is clearly represented in the record of his Resurrection appearances as having appeared in bodily and identifiable form to His disciples, and indeed, he once ate a piece of fish. He remembered his disciples; he could think about them and make plans for them .. yet he was freed from the normal limits imposed by our present physical embodiment. But

His other two analogies simply add a supplementary argument. You see, he says, just as there are different kinds of seed, and just as there are differences between men and animals, and between various celestial bodies, so is there a difference between the body with which the spirit was, so to speak, clothed in this life, and that with which it is to be adorned in the Resurrection. In other words, there is an embodiment appropriate to the level of existence, or in Paul's words in v.49, "Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven". Here I should like to interject a word for the materialist because I believe there is a word of encouragement here for the materialist. You see one of the materialist's main problems is that according to his way of thinking he cannot conceptualise how a personality could still be a true personality when the physical embodiment is no longer present. What the materialist should note here is that unlike the philosophical notion of immortality of the soul and disembodied spirits and all that, the

Christian revelation in fact teaches a doctrine which insists upon the continued embodiment of the personality. Moreover the materialist who is a scientist will know that it is possible to write computer programmes to stimulate human behaviour and that in a sense it is unimportant what particular form of hardware the embodiment is made of. It may be transistors, valves or what have you, but it still embodies the same programme. I think these recent scientific developments help us to better imagine how the real 'me' and the real 'you' as they now are could easily be embodied in another form of hardware, yet preserving all that is essential to personal identity. Indeed the very fact that the atomic structure of our present physical bodies changes completely every seven years should further warn us against identifying ourselves too definitely with our present embodiment. For this reason I believe that the Christian doctrine of resurrection to a body is less offensive to the materialist than the philosophical idea about immortality of the soul.

To return to our text .. having then used these analogies to clarify his point, Paul now presses on to a fuller consideration of "the spiritual body" and this occupies v.42-50. As we have noted already, the key to Paul's thinking in this section is the realization that he is teaching that the resurrection of the dead implies the continuance of personal identity. Paul is satisfied with nothing less than full personal immortality and all that this involves in the maintenance of identity and personal recognition. We are helped to appreciate the force of Paul's teaching on the continuance OF PERSONAL IDENTITY RATHER THAN REINCARNATION OR ANY IDEA OF ABSORPTION INTO THE BEING OF SOME INFINITE SPIRIT, if we remember the two widely prevalent conceptions of immortality commonly held in his day. On the one hand, his Jewish contemporaries, particularly the followers of the Pharisees - for the Sadducees seem to have denied the possibility of any resurrection - held that the resurrection body was identical with the earthly body. The Greeks on the other hand, insofar as they held any belief in immortality at

a cup of cold water for His sake shall lose its reward" (Matt. 10 v.42).

Not that anything we can do can EARN our forgiveness and acceptance with God - that is a FREE GIFT made available through the sacrificial death of Christ, but to those who accept that gift of eternal life, He promises rewards for faithful service. May God grant that the prospect of a glorious resurrection, in the which we who have

been sown PERISHABLE shall rise
IMPERISHABLE ... we who have
been sown INGLORIOUS shall be raised
IN GLORY ... we who have
been sown in WEAKNESS shall be
raised IN POWER .. we who have
been sown PHYSICAL shall be raised
SPIRITUAL

.. that all of this shall motivate us now to "stand firm and immovable, and work for the Lord always, work without limit, since we know that in the Lord our labour cannot be lost".