

The Resurrection of the whole person and the Renewal of Creation  
Sermon 15.04.18 St John's United Reformed Church  
Luke 24:36-48 1 Corinthians 15:35-53 Julian Templeton

The two questions that I'm attempting to address today all centre round the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. 1. "May Christians be cremated, or is this making the resurrection of the body impossible?" 2. "May Christians donate organs after their death?"

What, if any, role will the *body* have in the hoped-for resurrected or heavenly existence? This is an important issue, since it touches directly upon what we do with the body upon death. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the usual, indeed in most cases the only, last thing done to the body of the Christian who had died was interment in the ground by burial. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century crematoria began to be built in the UK and cremations began to be practised and have grown in popularity such that today over 70% of those who have died are cremated, including many Christians. So the first question is a pressing one: many or most Christians in the UK upon dying are cremated. How might this practice affect what God will do at an envisaged 'General Resurrection'. To begin to approach this question, let us first take one imaginative attempt to represent the resurrection in art.



Stanley Spencer, in his painting 'The Resurrection with the raising of Jairus's Daughter' (1947), seems to interpret resurrection literally. Those who have been dead are emerging by sliding the paving stones aside and holding their arms outstretched ready to be hauled out. They seem, in their resurrected existence, to be much like they were in life before they died, wearing the same clothes. Death, it seems, has been an interlude in life that resurrection allows to resume. Spencer's Cookham Churchyard resurrection paintings depict a similar understanding of resurrection. If we are tempted to dismiss Spencer's apparent understanding of resurrection as being overly-literal or naïve, it is worth our thinking about what artistic vision he was attempting to convey and why. Remember that Stanley Spencer experienced some of the horrors of the First World War. We can understand why a sensitive person might attempt to translate a hope that resurrection would reunite those who had died in tragic or squalid circumstances into pictorial form.

Something like this hope seemed to have given rise to a belief in resurrection in Judaism. Those Jews who had died violently and unjustly provoked the reaction of those who grieved their loss: if God is just, surely he has the power to right wrongs and to vindicate his chosen people in a life beyond death. In the Hebrew way of thinking it was inconceivable that such a life would not be embodied in some way. Thus the first disciples, and the evangelists who write the story of Jesus's resurrection, present us with an embodied Jesus. Indeed, Luke seems to make a point of dispelling an erroneous idea that had been circulating that the risen Jesus was a mere apparition or ghost. If this is the case, it would explain why in Luke's account Jesus is taken to say:

Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself. Touch me and see; no ghost has flesh and bones as you can see that I have. (Luke 24:39)

And because they were still incredulous he asks them:

'Have you anything here to eat?' They offered him a piece of fish they had cooked, which he took and ate before their eyes. (41-42)

The resurrected Jesus in Luke's account seems almost as robustly material and embodied as do the resurrected figures in Spencer's painting, any of whom one could imagine asking to eat a pork pie! And even if we think his painting is in some senses naïve, we ought to credit Spencer with having the courage to imagine, and having the skill to depict, a resurrected existence that is full of human tenderness and joy and conviviality. Spencer rightly identifies these qualities making human life worth living, qualities that we hope will continue in the heavenly existence.

Let us now turn to a different image that the Apostle Paul gives us:

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Paul, when trying to explain the resurrection of the body to the Corinthians who did not believe in it, uses the analogy of sowing a seed.

“The seed you sow does not come to life unless it has first died; and what you sow is not the body that shall be, but a bare grain, of wheat perhaps, or something else; and God gives it the body of his choice, each seed its own particular body...so it is with the resurrection of the dead: what is sown as a perishable thing is raised imperishable. Sown in humiliation, it is raised in glory; sown in weakness, it is raised in power; sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.” (1 Cor. 15:36-38, 42-44)

All of us who have planted seeds in the ground have wondered whether anything will come of them. The seed appears to be inert; it has no visible vestige of any future life. Yet sown in the ground, and given good conditions, the seed produces the seedling; the modest acorn produces the mighty oak tree; the gnarled tuber produces the dahlia with firework-like bursts of colour; and the tiny pip produces the prodigiously fruitful apple tree. Assuming one had never seen an oak tree, a dahlia or an apple tree, one could scarcely imagine that such humble seeds would grow into something so large or colourful or fruitful. Our experience of witnessing plants growing from seeds tells us that new and surprising expressions of life regularly come from something that appears unpromising.

In the similar way, the Apostle Paul challenges the beliefs of those in Corinth who dismissed the very idea of resurrection. If in the natural world, God, in his creative goodness, has allowed his creatures to develop from small beginnings into wondrously different and varied expressions of material and bodily life, it is well within his power to grant to those same creatures a resurrected existence with an even more wonderful splendour or glory (*doxa*). An earthly body has its particular glory; a heavenly body has a different glory. (see vv. 40-41)

In particular, what is sown or buried in the ground as a physical body will be raised as a spiritual body (v. 44a). This transformation of the physical into the spiritual is necessary because 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God' (v. 50). The Apostle Paul believes that the perishable and mortal body will, at the general resurrection, be clothed with an imperishable and immortal body (v. 54).

This, then, helps us to address the two questions that have been asked: 1. "May Christians be cremated, or is this making the resurrection of the body impossible?" 2. "May Christians donate organs after their death?" If God, as Creator, does the far more difficult thing of creating something out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) then we may assume that recreating or transforming what he has already created is well within his powers. The Christian belief and hope is that, whether buried or cremated, we who have been buried or cremated will be recreated and transformed into a heavenly and glorified existence. Therefore while the church upholds the traditional practice of bodily burial, neither the practices of cremation or organ donation conflict with the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. Similarly, one can make a good case that the practice of donating organs so that others can live is fully consistent with Jesus's example of sacrificing his life so that others might live. Jesus's resurrection was not a resuscitation but was a *transformation by glorification*. It was a *transition to a heavenly mode of existence* that was a *newly-embodied* existence. That transition, which for the Christian has already consciously begun in dying to self-centredness and coming alive to Christ, will be completed at the Last Judgment. It was the inestimable rediscovery of the Reformers that any status we have before God is not a matter of trying to be good enough but of trusting in *grace alone*.

Burial, whether of the body or of ashes, is an important practice of following Jesus's example of being like the seed that falls to the ground and dies and awaits the new life that God gives when he renews the whole Creation. Jesus is the forerunner and first-fruit of the new humanity that points ahead to the renewed Creation that both the Prophecy of Isaiah (11:6-10) and the Revelation to John (21:1-7; 22:1-5) evoke through various images and metaphors.

The Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Romans holds out the tantalising prospect that the whole cosmos is waiting with eager expectation for God's children to be revealed, when it will be freed from the shackles of mortality and enter upon the glorious liberty of the children of God (see Rom. 8:19-21). I believe and hope that in the new heaven and new earth we will be *more*, not less, *whole*, because we will dwell in God's immediate presence and will experience glorified communion with him and with one another far exceeding our present experience. Let us trust in God, and entrust those whom have died to God, and be content to become like seeds that await the new and glorious existence that God will recreate when he renews the whole Creation.