

“The Unity of Spirit and Matter”

(Luke 24.13-35)

Grant Bullen

The Road to Emmaus

On the Sunday after Jesus was executed, two ‘shattered’ disciples are walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus... when they are joined by a stranger... and they fall into deep conversation. The stranger is actually the risen Christ, but they don’t recognise him... until much later when over dinner, with the Last Supper strong in their memory, he blesses and breaks bread... and suddenly their eyes are opened and they recognise him! *Their eyes are opened...* to see what’s been staring them in the face all afternoon!

Like all the resurrection appearances it’s a strange story to our ears... until we think about how often it’s true that we don’t see... *can’t* see... something that we’re not expecting. For instance, I went looking for a book the other day... sure that I’d left it on the mantelpiece... but I couldn’t see it and went looking elsewhere. It was actually *there*, but I was looking for a book with a black cover... and it had a pink one... so my eyes looked past it. Our minds often only recognise what we *expect* to see, and overlook what we don’t. Or there’s that common experience of *hindsight*... We look back at things we did in the past, and say ‘*How could I have been so blind?*’ But we cannot see what we weren’t taught to look for.

That’s where *faith* comes in... Our faith *reveals*... brings to sight... the *true* reality of life. But it often comes as a shock... a surprise... a challenge... a mystery... because our culture never taught us to see reality this way. Faith *is* counter-cultural... that is, contrary to our expectations. Faith takes us into new territory... and so it’s more about exploring mystery than signing-up to certainty.

Nowhere is this *more* true than in The Resurrection. It looks so strange to our eyes... sounds so odd even nonsensical to our ears. Like the first disciples, this is *not* what we expected... But the faith is saying... the resurrection of Jesus is NOT a one-time anomaly, but it’s actually the regular and everyday structure of reality. Resurrection is the reality of life... but we can’t see it until it is revealed to us in this historical event of the empty tomb. The risen Christ comes to us in order that our eyes might be opened to the true reality... of our nature and our lives!

Creating and Forgetting

We've all grown up in a culture that splits reality into *spirit* and *matter*... as two distinct essences... and so that's how we see life. But for many years now science has been telling us that there is no measurable boundary between the two – that is, you can't measure where spirit ends and matter begins... and vice-versa. Instead the reality revealed by scientific observation is a constant interchange of both energy (spirit) and particles (matter) in every living thing. So as we sit here this morning, there is a constant interchange of energy *and* particles between all of us – we can't measure where I end and you begin. The clear inviolable distinction between 'me' and 'them' is how our eyes see it and our brain thinks about it, but it's not actually like that. Even more shocking is the scientific revelation that the same thing is happening between us and the pews... and the walls... and the altar... and everything! They are not 'dead' and 'inert' as we see them... but rather alive in the interchange of spirit and matter!¹

The Judaeo-Christian religions have always known this... It's the story we tell about the Creation. In the beginning there is *nothing*... and thus God creates *everything*. There is nothing that is not made from God's own 'self'. We dramatise the moment of *our* creation by saying that God breathes spirit into clay/dirt – so the 'Adam', the 'human' is both spirit and 'humus' (earth)² – we come from this creative joining of energy and matter. And faith says, everything is one... everything comes from God and everything returns to God... Matter and spirit are part of God's creation and regardless of how different they seem to our eyes, they *are* one.

But the story of Scripture describes how humanity keeps forgetting this essential reality of creation... and all sin comes from this denial of who (and what) we really are... our denial of the unity from which we come and to which we'll return.

Denial of Flesh

¹ I'm not a scientist... and I'm trying to reduce complex material to a simple description of a few lines. Hopefully I'm somewhere near the mark. As I hear it, contemporary science is questioning whether there is any meaningful distinction between energy and matter.

² Genesis 2.7

Religion always has a tendency to honour the spirit and denigrate matter... the 'flesh'. This leads to all sorts of problems... how we live with our own bodies, how we understand the power of sex, how we exercise 'stewardship' of the earth... and a lot more.³ Indeed, early Christianity had a terrible struggle with the 'false path' of Gnosticism, that taught the body and the earth were so corrupt that salvation demanded the spirit escape flesh/matter as soon as possible.

And most of us will have grown up with the simple understanding that when we die, our spirit leaves our dead-flesh and soars into the spiritual realm of heaven. It's the way I've been conditioned to see death and it makes sense of what my eyes witness... but then The Resurrection comes along and says, but that's not how reality is.

It's why the whole business of the *empty* tomb and the *physical* resurrection of Jesus is such a challenge to us. If it was simply the *spirit* of Christ that appears to the disciples, and there were still decaying bones somewhere in an undiscovered cave in Palestine, it would be a far easier story for us. But that's *not* what the story says... There's no discarded body! The resurrection of Christ has 'taken' the body *and* the spirit of Jesus up in the one package! It is as the book of Genesis told us – spirit and matter are one!

As I said at the beginning... all faith challenges our perception of reality, and no more so than in The Resurrection. If your brain is spinning trying to take this on board... so is mine! Faith is trying to take us to a totally new world.

Let's go to some (slightly) easier ground.

Denial of Spirit

The primary forgetting, however, has been to deny our divine spirit – that is, we become so focused on the material reality of life that we forget the spiritual. And there is no more materialist society in history than ours. Consumerism is built on the perceived reality that happiness and satisfaction come from gratifying the body and obeying the compulsive chatter of our brain (that we call the mind). Even those of us who call ourselves religious, tend to dabble in 'spirituality' as a separate and marginalised part of our life. We acknowledge our spirit for an hour or so on a Sunday morning,

³ There's not time to explore this in this sermon.

before returning to (what we call) our *real* lives. We've all grown up in a culture that teaches us that to expect reality to be about material satisfaction and safety – so it's almost impossible for us to recognise the life of spirit, even when this is right before our eyes.

Our society is dying in its preoccupation with self, because we've forgotten that we are not only flesh, but spirit. All sin, all anxiety and misery, comes from this fundamental denial that we are a creation of spirit and flesh.

Peace Be With You

And so in *John's* resurrection story (20:19-25)... the disciples are huddled behind locked doors... terrified. They've forgotten they are spirit and they're afraid of the death of their bodies. The Risen Christ, body as well as spirit, comes to them and breathes the Holy Spirit into them! It's an intentional memory of the first act of creation when God breathes spirit into the humus to make Adam... the first human. Christ is re-creating them... reconnecting flesh and spirit. He is reminding them... and us... who and what we really are!

This is such a critical story for the functional materialists we are. The Resurrection comes to reconnect us with our divine spirit. To introduce a new word... the Risen Christ comes to reconnect us with our *soul*. The soul is our true created essence.

When we reconnect with our soul, and see our true reality as this wonderful creation of God... where spirit and matter are one... then we begin to experience ourselves as *whole* once more. And abundant life flows.

Conclusion

The resurrection of Jesus is NOT a one-time anomaly, but it's actually the regular and everyday structure of reality.