

“The Spiritual Body”

(John 14.1-10)

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Introduction

Exploring the Resurrection inevitably brings us to reflect on the experience of death... our death. I wanted to continue the flow of the last two weeks, but the events of my week made that level of preparation impossible. However... the long hours of sitting next to my unconscious mother, waiting for her to die, was a preparation in itself. It's a mysterious business – death – and I am not in the mood to pretend I understand it. I can speculate and wonder... but I have no window into what it was that was being processed... transitioned... in my Mum in these last days. All I have to offer today is what the faith says – certainly not *all* that the faith says, but rather just a few things I find helpful, interesting *and* occasionally challenging. There were many times this week where I was very grateful... to have a faith... to be part of a church that faces death honestly... and tries to speak about it intelligently.

The prevailing attitude towards death in our culture these days is stoical. Most people *“are content to live within time, taking each day as it comes, accepting the death of friends as part of the process of day to day living.”*¹ *It is sad, but every life comes to an end!* This *does* have a certain healthy acceptance about it... *but* it's totally different from what the Christian faith wants to say.

We say that death is not the end of life but rather a transition to new life. Indeed that this life is no more than a foreword to the true life that is to come. Death will bring loss and grief for those who watch-on, but is a process of liberation for the one who dies.

Many Dwelling Places

¹ Noel Dermot O'Donoghue

Exploring the Resurrection inevitably brings us to reflect on death. And so the lectionary gives us John 14.1-10 as our gospel for the 5th week of the Easter season...

“Do not let your hearts be troubled... In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places... I go to prepare a place for you...”

... *the* most popular choice of scripture reading for funerals.

As a child I remember the comfort of this... heaven was *up there* above the clouds... God lived in a majestic palace of golden light... and there was a room there with my name on it. In earlier centuries it was possible to live with this ‘story’ as one’s hope... in an angelic-like life waiting in another place after our death. But as the first Russian cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, said on his return from space in 1961, *“I looked and I looked, but I didn’t see God up there.”*² We can’t live with *that* picture as our faith now... because we know it’s not like that.³

So... how can we speak meaningfully... intelligently... and helpfully about it now? And can the Resurrection help us in this?

Returning to God

In exploring the Resurrection over the last 2 weeks I’ve said simply.... that we come from God and we return to God. What we experience in these years of ‘this body, this individual (Grant), this life’... is transitional – it’s a *form* that spirit takes for a relatively short time... before it fades and dies as all *form* must eventually do. God’s spirit is breathed into us and we become this wonderful thing called a human being for a ‘brief’ time... and then the spirit returns to God when this form is over and done with.

So death is transitional – and it is just as much part of life as being born. Death is not separate to life but rather another experience of what it is to live... That’s what we see in Christ Jesus –

² It’s disputed whether he ever said this or whether it was invented as Soviet propaganda.

³ The gospel text is using ancient figurative language (where the universe was indeed seen as two tiered... and flat – earth below and heaven above... to speak of a simple hope that there is a life waiting for us beyond death... in God’s presence. It’s this that matters not the ancient picture of the universe.

the cross does not extinguish him and tomb cannot contain him. When he emerges he is in resurrected *form* – he walks through locked doors, he appears and disappears, he is not instantly recognisable (something is very different about him)... for this is *new* life.

And faith says this story reveals our journey.... that's how it will be for us too. Death will not extinguish us... the failing of our body will not wipe our true selves from existence. Death is no more an end than our birth – we are transitioning to *new* life.

The Spiritual Body

Faith says that death is a purification – everything that limited us, all that constrained us, is burned away. Certainly the physical constraints – the damaged lungs... the bung legs... whatever. But also the inner and private 'blockages' – the fear, the depression, the anger... even the painful memories and legacies of the past. All of *that* struggle is cleared away

All the old boundaries have gone too – the finite human capacity, including our limited ability to give and receive love, is gone. That fear we all have of truth and intimacy... all burned away.

St Paul's language was to say that we move from a *physical* to a *spiritual* body... his language for what others would call the passing of an old form and the return to formlessness. It's hard for us operating in a totally different culture to understand, but simply put, it means beyond death we experience complete freedom... know infinite beauty... and we move in unimaginable light. We will live free of our current limitations of space and time and swim in a sea of bottomless love. We will be reunited with God and all people... indeed all creation... in the unity of being from which we came.

I'm not wanting to conjure up some image of harp-playing blandness, of a snow-flake world of innocuous niceties... nor some re-heated version of *this* life. No... the faith is speaking of total freedom... of unimaginable light... of infinite love... of endless beauty... experiences we *taste* in this life, but which are always constrained and limited by our frailty and our fear.

It's *new* life we transition to... and it's liberating and wonderful.

But It's Us

But here is where it gets challenging for me. If it was simply that the spirit leaves the dead body (which is discarded as unnecessary baggage)... and returns to the original soup of creation... indistinguishable and unrecognisable... I could envisage this. I may feel sad about what is gone, but nonetheless it would make sense to me. But that's *not* what the faith says...

You may remember that I said I'd find the Resurrection a less challenging story if it was just Jesus spirit that was raised... leaving the dead bones to be discovered by archaeologists in some future century. But the Resurrection stories and the faith of the church are adamant – it is a full and physical resurrection. When he appears to the disciples he is very different – he walks through locked doors, he appears and disappears, he is not instantly recognisable – but nonetheless it *is* him... and they *do* recognise him eventually.

The faith is trying to say something more than 'our spirit continues'... Here I struggle and the conclusion to this sermon is very dependent on the words of a spiritual theologian... Noel Dermot O'Donaghue.

In the new life, we are still the person others knew and loved, for in what comes next we live as the *true self* we were created to be. If we saw a departed friend, we *would* recognise them. The Christian faith is very definite about this. It's not just the soul that survives death, "*the spirit also survives and awakens, bringing with it a whole world of memory and desire, of self-identity and relationship, of pathos and poignancy*".⁴ I'm not sure how he's using *spirit* and *soul* here but he's saying we are truly alive in the world beyond, and we take the experience of *this* life with us. This life that we're currently living matters – indeed there is something critical, indeed essential being learned or transacted here. Perhaps that's what the Easter stories are telling us about the resurrected body? The faith is not speaking of resurrection as some indistinct

⁴ Noel Dermot O'Donaghue

unrecognisable life form floating in a void... but of us – recognisably us – living a new life... restored to the unity from which we came.

“All that we have been and loved and known, goes with us into that purifying darkness and emerges in the full clarity of universal love. And this love is now the very atmosphere of our being; it illuminates, permeates, penetrates everything.”⁵

I know... it sounds too beautiful to be true... many say it's just wishful thinking. Maybe... **but** it is what the Christian faith says. Just because it's beautiful doesn't mean that it must necessarily be fantasy. But it is faith and thus it can never be proved. You choose whether to have faith or not. We live in it... and we die in it. It is indeed beautiful and as people of faith we trust ourselves to it.

⁵ Noel Dermot O'Donaghue