

## Remembering with Love service 10th Nov. 2013 6.00pm Gt. Miss

*Almighty God -help us as we search for a deep truth that can comfort our hearts and lead us into life. Amen*

You may be someone who never doubts -I have yet to meet such a person, but it might be you.

I guess this sermon is for the rest of us.

Those of us who have grown up in a religious family and always gone along with it, but who, when faced with the reality of death can't avoid the question -the simple question -is it true?

Those of us who have never really done religion and steer clear of church and formal stuff -but when faced with the reality of death ask - what if -what if it is true after all?

It seems so unlikely. We know someone's heart stops, we know the brain ceases to function, we know that the words earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes are as final as it gets -and yet.....how can the lovely , vibrant, extraordinary, creative person that loved be extinguished for ever. How can that be?

What is there really is something deeper and more powerful than death itself?

What on earth, or in heaven, might this 'resurrection' actually mean?

I wonder if you ever feel like that about resurrection?

What if the whole concept of resurrection is an illusion? What if this is really the end -and we won't ever see them again? That's what a very large number of people, intelligent, sensible people all round the world do think.

So what is it exactly that we are claiming when we use the term *resurrection*?

In our story here about Lazarus it seems fairly clear -Lazarus was dead....well dead, dead to the point decomposition, and in response to the command of Jesus he becomes alive again. There were people there,

lots of people, and they saw it happen, and we now have the written witness reports. Lazarus would of course die in the fullness of time. His resurrection was, as it were, temporary. Its not really so problematic. You could chose to believe it, or not, but it is clear that if you had been there yourself you could have made up your own mind, because there was Lazarus, just the same human Lazarus, walking around and clearly alive in the same way as you and I are alive.

Resurrection like Jesus' resurrection, resurrection which we rely on when someone we love dies, resurrection which entails heaven, that sort of resurrection is far more tricky.

So what exactly might we think happens? Mostly we say that we simply don't know -but that it is a matter of trust. We know from the bible that it happens and it is not within our ability to understand. Faith is needed not reason.

Now while that is undoubtedly true, I think we sell the Christian faith short if we suggest that it is not a rational, perfectly reasonable faith - faith that you can integrate with your intellect.

Many philosophers, such as for example Plato and Descartes think of the person in terms of the soul -which is the real me and which it is trapped in the body. The soul drives the body, rather like a ghost in a machine. This soul pre-exists our conception and it survives the death of the body. In the fullness of time, after death this soul is united to a new body.

Modern science has made this view much more difficult to hold. Specially as we know are beginning to understand so much more about how the brain works. . We know that brain states can be affected by our bodies and that drugs can easily affect our minds. An operation can alter a person's whole personality and memory . Given that the brain is the seat of our emotions, memory and actions, does this mean that our souls are similarly affected? Could my soul possibly survive if my brain does not?

Let me give you the classic illustration by a chap called Gilbert Ryle. He suggests that we are mistaken in thinking that there is something separate and identifiable which can be called 'soul' and gives this example~: A foreigner, or someone from outer space -you know, someone with no previous experience of cricket asks to be shown the game. He sees the bowlers, the batsmen, the wicket keeper, the fielders and the umpires but

then says: “I have seen all these people but where is the team spirit? The mistake he makes is to think that ‘team spirit’ is something on top of all those things he has seen. In the same way, he goes on to argue, the soul is not an extra something on top of all the intentional actions of a human person. To talk of soul is to talk about the way a person acts and responds to other people; it is not to talk of a disembodied ghost of some sort.

If you were listening to the radio early this morning you will have heard this being discussed. In what way can we talk about a person -a soul – separate from the body that make that person real. –This is where science is leading us –and it may be right - , when we die, when our body stops then we are completely dead. There is no separate soul that floats off somewhere else. It also means that when we are raised from the dead it is the whole of us that is raised.

Christianity has always affirmed the resurrection of the body-for two main reasons:

Firstly: Jesus himself. He had appeared to the disciples, and hundreds of others, not as a disembodied spirit, but as a resurrected person who could walk and talk with his friends and even eat food with them. He was, however, a special kind of person, since he could appear in a locked room. Pre-mortem Jesus seemed remarkably similar to post-mortem Jesus, even down to the imprint of the nails in his hands.

Secondly, Christianity has never denied the importance of the physical world. We are running up to Christmas which is about God taking human flesh and making this flesh, and with it the world we live in, holy. The physical world is not in some way a second-class category in comparison with spiritual, disembodied souls. We know that in grief. We might believe that the person we love will be resurrected, but it is the real, person, their touch, their voice, their laugh -that we so miss.

It’s a bit like this -the legacy is the love, but the hope is the resurrection. And I do believe that all the evidence points to the entirety of someone transcending death. However, it leaves us with a tricky problem - the irrefutable evidence that our bodies turn to dust after our death.

Well, try this for an example....I think it works.

In my study I have a computer. I have written, created, this sermon on the computer. When I go home tonight I will take this sermon, which by then will be tatty round the edges, may have coffee spilt on it, may

even be torn and I will put it in the bin. It might get burnt or end up in some landfill site. To all extents and purposes this sermon will be gone. But of course I can go to my computer and print out a new one. It will have all the same words, the same lay out, spelling, punctuation and so on. It will be in every way the same sermon, except that it will be printed on a pristine new piece of paper. I could, if I wished transmit it by a radio signal to a satellite, and from there the signal could be bounced back to say Sidney where an identical sermon would then be printed out.

A similar process might happen to us after death. God our creator knows our detailed specification, including all our DNA and our memories. So when someone dies God , re-creates, resurrects that person. St Paul talks of us having a new and glorified body, and there could be parallels here, possibly with defects in our bodies being rectified.

Now I really hope you haven't all fallen asleep, because the reason I've taken time to explore whether it is in any way reasonable to believe in resurrection is because it is so vitally important. It is the crucial truth of our faith. Paul knew it - he said: 'if Christ is not raised your faith is in vain' -and there are times in all our lives when belief in the resurrection is what keeps us going. I would like you to go home with this evening, with a stronger trust in God's eventual plan for all of us. The resurrection is not a whimsical idea, a piece of magic, a concept you can only believe in if you throw your mind out of the window.

Of course, as I have said before, there cannot be proof that does not involve faith. If it were clear beyond any doubt then we would have our freewill to choose to love God taken away. But faith and reason go hand in hand and provide us with a hope -a certain hope – one that gives us confidence for those whom we love and ultimately for ourselves as well.  
AMEN