

"We shall be like him."

EASTER-Fr. Jeff Monroe

"If the spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you." (Romans 8.1 1)

Throughout the years, many have wondered what the resurrection would be like for each of us. Would it be like the resurrection of our Lord, or like Lazarus-coming out of the tomb as they did, bodies in tact, whole and of flesh and blood? Would our bones grow flesh and as we heard on Holy Saturday, would the breath of life return to us? Would those who rest at sea, step onto the shore? What of the soul? These are not new questions or issues that have been considered through the centuries. Even the Apostles saw just how people misunderstood what our resurrection meant as they preached the Gospel to Jew and Gentile alike.

The seventeenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles tells us the story of St. Paul's troubles in Thessalonica and Berea, and of his escape to Athens, where he waited for Silas and Timothy, before going on to Corinth. While he waited in Athens, his time was not wasted:

His spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Therefore disputed he in the synagogue. and in the market daily with them that met with him. Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans and of the Stoics, encountered him. And some said, what will this babbler say? Others said, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus and the resurrection." (Acts 17.16-18)

There were many aspects of Christian preaching which were readily accepted in the ancient world, by both Jews and Greeks. Convictions about the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man were by no means peculiar to the Christians. Even the notion of the immortality of the soul was commonplace. Christian moral teachings, though certainly not very fully practiced in the pagan world, seemed to contain nothing very new or startling. On such matters, St. Paul could quote the Greek poets: "in God we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17.28)

The apostolic witness was much more substantial: it was witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead; and that was troublesome. It seemed absurd. The ancient Hellenistic world cried out for a "spiritual" salvation, whereby immortal souls might escape from the prison of the body to a realm from which all physical, transitory things would be excluded. But the prospect of that salvation was not altogether hopeful. In the greatest literary work of Roman antiquity, the Aeneid of Virgil, there is a wonderful scene in which Aeneas, the hero, journeys through the underworld, and meets the spirit of his father. In the fields of Elysium, his father points out to him the souls preparing to return to earth, and Aeneas cries out in protest:

'But, O my father, is it thinkable, That souls would leave this blessedness, be willing A second time to bear the sluggish body. Trade paradise for earth? Alas, poor wretches, Why such a mad desire for light?' (Aeneid VI, 719)

And his father explains that only after drinking the waters of the River Lethe, where memory is annulled, are they willing to enter once more into mortal bodies. And so the conflict of soul and body, of spirit and matter, goes on, in endless and hopeless cycles. Only in forgetfulness can it be borne.

The resurrection of Christ was not a return to mortal body. It was not resuscitation, as with Lazarus; nor was it the escape of immortal soul. It was the transformation of body, the reconciliation of flesh and spirit. The Risen Lord was not a ghost: "A spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have." (Luke 24.39) The disciples were incredulous. Clearly, in spite of what Jesus had said, they expected no such thing. They hoped to embalm his body, and preserve it as a sacred relic. Their immediate reaction to the resurrection was fear and dismay. They knew the limits of the possible. "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe," said Thomas. (John 20.25) But they saw, and they believed, and their lives became a witness to the resurrection.

But what does that witness really mean? I think that for many modern people, as for the Ancient world, the resurrection story seems not quite credible. We would accept more readily a more "spiritual" salvation. Men die, but their ideals live on. The flesh decays, but the human spirit is unbeatable, and triumphs over the ravages of time. We live on in our descendants, and find in that a kind of spiritual immortality.

But that supposedly "spiritual" salvation has a terrible emptiness about it, an incompleteness and inconclusiveness. As St. Paul says to the Corinthians, "If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." (1 Corinthians 15.32) And we all know, all too well, the truth of those famous lines of Isaac Watts:

*Time, like an ever-rolling stream / Bears all its sons away; /
They fly, forgotten as a dream / Dies at the opening day.*

The doctrine of the Resurrection attests to the wholeness of man's salvation in Christ, which must include the redemption of the body. It must involve a redemption in which nothing can finally be lost except for sin. Our longing is "not to be unclothed, but to be clothed upon." (2 Corinthians 5.4) "if Christ be in you," says St. Paul, "the body is dead because of sin: but the spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you."

The manner of that quickening transformation is beyond all explanation, and "we know not what we shall be, but we shall be like him." (1 John 3.2) God has established resurrection in Christ, and what is Christ's belongs to those who are his. "For our citizenship is in heaven, from whence we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change our vile body, which it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself." (Philippians 3.20-21)

This is not a myth, it is a truth! As we die in Christ, so too will we live again in Him. It is His promise to us! May the truth of His victory give you HIS peace. Amen. +