

THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

By WILLIAM LAWSON

WHEN HE LISTENS to Handel's *Messiah* the christian may respond with emotional warmth to 'And in my flesh I shall see God'; but 'the resurrection of the body' in the creed leaves him cold. The certainty of bodily resurrection is admitted, but it arouses no enthusiasm. In a sense, the average christian does not want it – at the price he will have to pay. He is prepared to have it happen to him; but he is not eager that it should happen, and he does not mind how long he has to wait for it.

For that indifference there are two main reasons: firstly, that the preliminary to resurrection is death; and secondly, that the successful sequel to death is a blank – unimaginable, indescribable, powerless to attract.

The condition for resurrection is so appalling that it halts the mind, preventing its advance to a contemplation of what lies beyond. Were it possible to avoid the condition, man would be strongly tempted to forego the promised consequence. The poet's fear beats a frightening rhythm in most hearts: *Timor mortis conturbat me*.

My heart is in anguish within me,
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.
Fear and trembling come upon me,
and horror overwhelms me.¹

The only self man can be aware of is a living self. However harsh life may be, he clings to it as to his identity: he may be tired of living, but he is feared of dying.

Death is a lifelong companion. At first it is no more than a hint of darkness in the sky, a black cloud building up on a far horizon. It never vanishes or recedes: if it moves at all it comes closer. Its victories are chronicled every day – victories over the famous and the notorious, the old and the young. It lays siege, or it strikes suddenly; but always it triumphs. Sooner or later it invades one's immediate circle, and from then on it is a familiar.

¹ Ps 55.

To be conscious of death as near enough to beckon oneself is to be shocked into a knowledge of death's pervasiveness. Death is not just an event waiting to end a life; it is a certainty which attaches itself to every human being at the first moment of existence, and which has to be taken into account for a right estimate of every thought and action that life contains. Man is mortal; his days are numbered; his life is forfeit to death. He is death's prisoner.

The cords of death encompassed me,
the torments of perdition assailed me;
the cords of Sheol entangled me,
the snares of death confronted me.¹

Within the limits set by death – 'the years of our life are three-score and ten' – any freedom that man thinks he has must be discounted. He can cast his mind forward into the future, trying to shape it; but he can take only a few steps into it – the rest belongs to others.

When his breath departs he returns to his earth;
on that very day his plans perish.²

Personal history ends with death. Men and women who have controlled the destinies even of nations meet their own fate, and slip back into 'the darkness of those long dead',³ never again to live through another historical moment.

That terrible cessation of temporal life defies preparation. It happens once for all. Everyone encounters it utterly inexperienced, and everyone must endure it alone. The most destructive and terrifying event in any life is too personal to be shared: it is all one's own.

To outward seeming there could be no difference in dying between a believer and an unbeliever. Each leaves a body to be buried:

His spirit shall go forth
and he shall return into his earth:⁴

and their disintegration could have been attended with like fears and struggles. What has christianity to say to the followers of Christ, marked for death as they all are? It says that Christ died, and, in dying, overcame death. Death has ceased to be the tyrant no man can escape and has become a herald of life in Christ.

Death is swallowed up in victory.

¹ Ps 18.

² Ps 146.

³ Ps 143.

⁴ Ps 145.

O death, where is thy victory?

O death, where is thy sting?¹

Death as we know it is the conclusion of life as it was never meant to be, life corrupted by sin.

The sting of death is sin.²

Christ's life, death and resurrection have freed us from enslavement to sin and taken the sting out of death.

He was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.³

That christian revelation throws light on the confusion in our minds, which accept death as natural and resent it as unnatural. A generation is born, and a generation passes away; and nobody would expect any other pattern of history: yet in everyone there is a determination to live and a refusal to die, in repudiation of what is called man's 'debt to nature'. The incarnation illuminates death in its origins. Man was not created mortal. 'For God made not death; neither hath he pleasure in the destruction of the living'.⁴ It was only after man had abandoned God by sin that sentence of death was passed against him. 'In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return'.⁵ God is the living God and the maker of life. It was the devil whose envy tempted man into mortality. 'For God created man incorruptible . . . but, by the envy of the devil, death came into the world'.⁶ The devil, as Christ said, 'was a murderer from the beginning'.⁷ Man and the devil brought death into the world when they cooperated in man's sin.

The salvation of man from sin saves him from death as well. Christ assumed our mortal and sinful nature. God sent 'his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh'.⁸ 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God'.⁹ The punishment of sin, which is death, fell upon him. He feared it, accepted it, and suffered it, making us his heirs and beneficiaries. Our new life is the fruit of Christ's death. 'Unless a

¹ 1 Cor 15, 54-55.

⁴ Wis 1, 13.

⁷ Jn 8, 44.

² 1 Cor 15, 56.

⁵ Gen 3, 19.

⁸ Rom 8, 3.

³ Isai 53, 5.

⁶ Wis 2, 23.

⁹ 2 Cor 5, 21.

grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit'.¹ Christ fought a duel with death and killed it. 'We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God'.² We also have that superiority over death by union with Christ, and we must apply to ourselves his words to Martha: 'I am the resurrection and the life; he that believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die'.³

If we can take the sting out of death, it is no longer death except in name; or if we can anticipate death, we can be fully alive as we die, and so approach what remains of death with an enlivening experience.

That is possible for the christian, and imperative. Christ took us with him on the cross, in our mortality and sinfulness; and in the most serious and important of ways we have died with him. 'One has died for all, therefore all have died'.⁴ We make Christ's death our own when we are baptized: 'All of us who have been baptized with Christ Jesus were baptized into his death'.⁵ So, while we are still alive, we count as dead, and 'our life is hid with Christ in God'.⁶ It is a mystical death, death to sin, the flesh and the world; but, by being death to sin, which is 'the sting of death', it is death to death itself. We are alive as never before, with a life that is indestructible, free from all that is deadening.⁷

The world and the flesh are the domain and the tools of the 'principalities and powers' called 'the devil'; and 'the devil, the world and the flesh' make a three-headed zombie, carrion that pretends to be alive. 'The prince of this world is already judged'; but the world and the flesh have still a hope of resurrection in Christ. They were made by God, and were good. It is sin that has corrupted them, giving them illusions of an independent and selfish life, separated from God and closed to his spirit. The human spirit, united with the flesh and set in the world, can be either rebellious and lost with them or conformed with Christ in his death and made alive by him. So enlivened, the spirit becomes the agent of the redemption and resurrection of its own body and of the world, so that they too live by baptism and recover their goodness. The flesh is

¹ Jn 12, 24-26.

⁵ Rom 6, 31.

² Rom 6, 9.

⁶ Col 3, 3.

³ Jn 11, 25.

⁷ Cf Heb 9, 14.

⁴ 2 Cor 5, 14.

transformed into a spiritual body; and the person, his frailty overcome, is free to move towards perfect happiness, and the world becomes a fit setting for the human being's love of God and of his fellows, a world cleared of the miasma of sinfulness that was darkness and the shadow of death.

The mystical death which enlivens the spirit may seem to offer no comfort to the christian who still has to die like everybody else; and both St Peter and St Paul could be quoted to intensify his disappointment that christian advantages are not to be enjoyed this side of the grave: 'your spirits are alive because of righteousness' – that is what we hoped – but 'because of sin your bodies are dead'¹ – that is as we feared. We are 'being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit'.² But redemption is of the whole person, body and soul; and soul and body share one resurrection. 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption of sons, the redemption of our bodies'.³ Soul and body are so close that the condition of the one is bound to affect the other. When the soul rises with Christ, the body partakes of the fruit of the redemption and is gradually restored to the immortality which properly belongs to it. Not only are body and soul made for one another: they make one another. The human body is the body of a soul, so that without the soul it is no longer a human body; and the human soul is the soul of a body, and away from the body it is not a soul. The body is not the material element in a compound of matter and spirit: it is a spiritual body, made what it is by intimate union with a spirit; and the soul is a spirit fulfilling its natural purpose of being a body's principle of life, construction and development.

The union of body and soul is one of interdependence. The body gives the spirit existence as a soul, opens a way for the soul into the material world, and is the condition of the soul's fulfilment in its shaping of that world. The soul, to fashion the body into a perfect instrument, penetrates and permeates it, spiritualizes it through and through, and organizes it for the spiritual purposes of the whole man. Man is then a corporealized spirit and spiritualized matter: he is a soul and he is a body: he is a unity who should be unswervingly intent on the good, the true and the beautiful – on God. Had man become his true self, death would be that final spiritualization of

¹ Rom 8, 12.

² 1 Pet 3, 18.

³ Rom 8, 22–23.

the whole man, body and soul. It would be an ecstatic achievement, and not a passive dissolution dreaded in its certainty and uncertainty. Bodily immortality would be manifest to the senses, and the change from time to eternity would be made triumphantly in an access of glory.

The eventual resurrection of the body is assured. It is implied in the redemption of the spirit. It is promised in revelation. There are passages in the Old Testament which have the sound of the christian creed. Isaiah says:

The dead shall live, their bodies shall rise.
O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For thy dew is a dew of light,
and on the land of the shades thou wilt let it fall.¹

Daniel has a prophecy in gospel terms: 'Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt'.² It is debated how much weight of christian doctrine such texts will bear; but by the time of the Machabees belief in the resurrection of the body was explicit and firm: 'Thou indeed, O most wicked man, destroyest us out of this present life: but the King of the world will raise us up, who die for his laws, in the resurrection of eternal life'.³ In the days of Christ the sadducees were counted as heretics for their denial of the resurrection of the body:

You are wrong because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead but of the living.⁴

The hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement.⁵

The resurrection of the body, St Paul says, is implicit in the resurrection of Christ:

¹ Isai 26, 19.

⁴ Mt 22, 23.

² Dan 12, 2.

⁵ Jn 5, 25.

³ 2 Macc 7, 9.

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised . . . But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those that have fallen asleep.¹

The saved, then, will again be soul and body – soul and body inseparable in fact, as they have always been inseparable in destiny. The body, moreover, will be the same body which was born, had its span of years, and died – in the words of Lateran IV: ‘All will arise with their own bodies, those which they now have’. During earthly life, the soul has maintained the identity of the body through all the changes of its material constituents; and it continues that identity in eternal life.

What will the resurrected body be like? It is a question that leaves room for much speculation; but the scriptures have set the limits within which speculation can range. ‘Our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself’.² The glorified body will have a perfectly secure tenure of life. Physical evil – suffering, illness and death – will be banished for ever:

If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.³

The Apocalypse echoes the prophecy of Isaiah:

Behold the dwelling of God with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.⁴

The other qualities of the glorified body are the forces or potentials which have been gradually developing under the influence of the resurrected spirit. They have appeared briefly in some holy persons; and Christ sometimes allowed them to show in himself; but

¹ 1 Cor 15, 13, 20.

² Phil 3, 21.

³ Rom 6, 8–11.

⁴ Apoc 21, 3–4.

mostly they are held in abeyance. Now, in the perfect union of body and soul, they are released. The earthly body is gross and lumpish: the spiritual body has a range and ease of movement which we can hardly imagine, but which are exemplified by Christ after his own resurrection. He was recognizably the same Christ the apostles knew, and he was bodily present to them; but, although the doors were shut, he stood suddenly in their midst, and he vanished as easily from their sight. He was present to them always in spirit: in body, he was present or absent at will, unhampered by the bodily limitations which restrict us. The glorified body will have also something of the brilliant beauty of Christ in the transfiguration. 'The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father'.¹

In the christian view, with a spiritual death accomplished and bodily resurrection in prospect, death is an activity rather than the ultimate passivity. It is only the last of a long series of acts aiming at union with Christ in his death and resurrection: it is the final step to the attainment of the fulness of the new life which began in baptism when we died mystically and rose with Christ. Christian living is that steady effort to realize Christ's life fully in ourselves; and, though the body seems inevitably to lose its youth and liveliness, it is in fact sharing the enlivenment of the spirit and moving ever nearer to its own glory. Asceticism, traditionally described as mortification, could as well be called vivification. St Paul uses both ideas – 'if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you shall live',² and, 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies'.³

Carrying in the body the death of Christ, intensifying our baptismal life, we prepare for an active and lively death. All the sufferings and hardships of life, if they are a deliberate sharing of Christ's sufferings, are works of charity, and they are effective for ourselves and others as only charity can be. To work for others, to have patience so as to understand them, to be compassionate, to put up with illness, to be content with the gradual breakdown of the body, to cooperate with the providence of God however demanding it may be – that is to kill the old unregenerate man, to come alive as a person in both body and soul. Mortality, so used, is interpenetrated with life: and the last apparent triumph of mortality, death itself, is its own denial and defeat. Death is action as well as passion. It is a conclusion called for from outside ourselves; but we

¹ Mt 13, 43.

² Rom 8, 13.

³ 2 Cor 4, 10.

do more than accept it – we make it. As closely as may be, we imitate Christ: 'I lay down my life . . . No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord'.¹ Death will be the shattering in a moment of our physical integrity; but at the same time it is our supreme effort at spiritual perfection. To accept death when it comes to claim us, to be 'reconciled' to its triumph over us, is a christian recognition of the inevitable; but the christian can force death to make him alive, and can choose death as the crowning of his life's work. Death is not just the condition for entry into eternal life; it is the ultimate vivifying action of the soul, victorious and desirable. That is the sense of St Paul's desire:

For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain
. . . My desire is to depart and be with Christ.²

The choice of death in the company of Christ is only the culmination of a lifetime's choice of 'mortification' with him and at his invitation: 'If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'.³ It is a hard practice, but enlivening; and death could be its most enlivening act, the consummation of the work of grace. Death chosen for Christ is a fruitful part of the husbandry of salvation, in which we are fellow labourers of Christ: 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit'.⁴

¹ Jn 10, 17-18.

² Phil 1, 21-22.

³ Mt 16, 24.

⁴ Jn 12, 24.