

Job 19:23-27

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

John 11:17-44

Resurrection

We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come is the final phrase in the Nicene creed. But what does it mean? What is resurrection? What kind of life is the life of the world to come?

The story of the raising of Lazarus probably tells us more than any other story in the gospels about Jesus's attitude to life and death. He recognises the importance and the value of life – this life. Life in the here and now. Ordinary, everyday life. And he knows what it is like to lose a dear friend. He knows the sadness and the loss. He sheds tears at Lazarus's death. He empathises with others who mourn. He grieves.

But as he comforts Lazarus's sister Martha in her grief, he speaks some words that bring hope. Hope that this world, this life, be it joyful or sad, be it full of opportunity or full of difficulty, whatever it might be like, is not all there is. He says 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'

Those words are the words I use at the start of every funeral service I take. Those words set the scene for a Christian funeral. Those words bring hope, bring meaning, bring purpose.

These days many funeral services are described as celebrations of life. I have no problem with that, but if that is all they are then we come away with no hope for the future. We have celebrated the life of the person we loved; we have remembered the good (and sometimes the not so good) things about them, we have shared our stories and our memories but we come away with an acceptance that death is simply the end. And that offers us no hope for the future.

I was at a funeral on Friday – it wasn't one that I was taking - it was the funeral of someone I have known as a friend for 25 years. Jon was just a few years older than me, but 10 or 12 years ago he developed dementia. He has been struggling with it ever since as his health, slowly at times, more speedily at other times, deteriorated. The dementia has now claimed his life. The service on Friday was a celebration of his life – his widow shared some moving and poignant memories of the good and joyful times and also the sad and difficult times. We laughed and we cried.

But the service also celebrated Jon's faith – his faith in Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life. A faith that recognised death, but also rejoiced in everlasting life, fullness of life. Resurrection.

This poem by Gerard Kelly was read out. It acknowledges the sadness and the reality of Jon's dementia, but also anticipated the quality and joy of everlasting resurrection life.

*it was a marvellous healing;
after the months of asking,
of waiting;
after the desperate, slow deterioration,
the warring tides
of faith and doubt:
to be released in an instant,
from every pain.
it was as if the very molecules of his flesh
had been infused, invaded,
with the life of God,
until he was filled, fit to burst,
with the Shalom, the peace,
of the Father's rule.
limbs that had fallen flaccid with weakness
waved and danced with joy;
lungs that had so utterly failed him
sang out with strength and boldness.*

*he ran
through the unfamiliar sunlight,
drinking it in,
experiencing all at once
the thousand and one feelings
that for so long had been denied him.*

*it was a marvellous healing:
to be so totally restored,
made whole,
rebuilt.
it had just surprised him,
a little,
that he had had to die
to receive it.*

Perhaps when we think of the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come we should view it as a marvellous healing. When all the wrongs, all the restrictions, all the pains and sorrows and regrets and heartaches of this life are left behind. A chance to leap and dance and sing and shout with all the energy and excitement that we can imagine as we are restored in body, mind and spirit.

That of course is just a picture. It does, I believe, convey something of the wonder of this fullness of life, this life everlasting but it doesn't tell us the whole story. Indeed it cannot, because we simply don't know.

What we do know from scripture including from the example of Jesus's own resurrection is that this future resurrection life is not some wishy washy semi reality but something real and solid. It is physical yet more than physical just as Jesus' resurrection body was physical in that he could be recognised and was seen to eat and drink, yet more than physical as he was able to appear and disappear and walk through locked doors.

Elsewhere in John's gospel in chapter 10 Jesus talks of him bringing life in its fullness. "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly" or in a slightly different translation "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full."

What Jesus is saying is that the Resurrection life. Everlasting life. Life in abundance. The fullness of life. Whatever we might call it begins now. In Jesus and because of Jesus. Not in the future at some unknown time, but right now. It's not simply about what happens when we die but is in the here and now. Accessed and available through our faith in Jesus who is the resurrection; who is the life. When we live lives with Jesus we are living life as it was always meant to be. As God planned it to be.

It may not seem like that. Perhaps the hurts and pains and trials and difficulties prevent us from seeing the truth. But I am sure that even through those challenges we sometimes see glimpses of what life could be like. Fullness of life. Maybe in the giving and receiving of love; perhaps in the birth of a new baby; some act of kindness or generosity or the beauty and wonder of nature. A glimpse which points towards a greater reality. An anticipation of a glorious future.

The resurrection life then is something we can experience now, albeit in glimpses and snippets, but it is something that will be fully revealed when our time in this world comes to an end and we experience that marvellous healing. This resurrection life is the hope that marks out the Christian faith – hope for the present as well as the future. Hope – certain hope – that we can live in God's presence into eternity.