

Service of the Word

1 Corinthians 15:53

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A Prayer for the Day:
Living God, Holy Trinity
before whom the generations rise and pass away,
to whom all life is an open book,
you search us and know us,
yet never control us,
and your Spirit prays for us with sighs too deep for words.
Thank you for the signs of your presence –
within ourselves and through others:
a nudge, a call, a vision,
encouragement, rebuke, and unexpected wisdom.
Show us how to live our lives before you,
in your presence, your absence,
and everything in between,
through Jesus Christ
your out-going Word.

If we have experienced the perishability of the human body and brain in ourselves or in someone close to us, this text speaks to our reality and our hope.

The King James Version reads, “This corruptible must put on incorruption.” But nowadays the word “corruptible” says more about ethics than decomposition. So “perishable” is the more accurate translation.

Like a coin, all life on earth, including human life, has two sides. The upside, the face of the coin, is life’s exuberance, energy, adaptability, and tenacity, unmistakable in springtime as leaves and blossoms cover the trees and squirrels skitter across the grass, and unmistakable also in the exuberance, energy, adaptability, and tenacity of infants, children, youth and young adults.

The downside, the obverse of the coin is that life is mortal and therefore perishable. A species continues, but its members perish. If you drive past the sad remains of a bird or a squirrel hit by a car, you can see the meaning of “perishable.” If you leave a bell pepper in the fridge until parts of it go squishy, you can pick it up and feel the meaning of “perishable.” If you leave a piece of fish on the kitchen counter at room temperature for a day, or – perish the thought! – a vacation, when you return you will smell the meaning of “perishable.” And if — you are afflicted by a stroke, you experience in yourself the meaning of “perishable.”

On Thursday June 8, 2006, at 10 o’clock in the evening, I was sitting with dear friends in their home near Edinburgh, Scotland, when a tiny clot of blood (I’m simplifying – there were several), a coagulated speck, floating in a stream of oxygen-rich

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blood powerfully pumped by the heart was carried up into the right side of my brain. There it floated on in blood vessels growing ever narrower until it could go no further and got stuck. Starved of oxygen, brain cells in that region died. They *perished*, not perhaps in a twinkling of an eye, but in minutes. And there they sit, up there somewhere—dead. The electrical impulses they had been sending to muscles on the left side of my body, in particular my left arm, ceased. Movements hitherto taken for granted unraveled, and my arm hung useless at my side. My friends phoned for help. Paramedics arrived, skillful and comforting. I was taken to hospital and admitted to the Acute Stroke Unit of the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh where I spent two weeks in the superb care of the British National Health service.

I learned how heavy an arm is when one can no longer move it, and that it is important to know where the arm is to avoid lying on it. And I learned by experience what I had previously known intellectually, that the gifts and skills we foster, treasure, and prize (ordinary bodily movements, dexterity, agility, athleticism, and dance, playing a musical instrument, making pottery, painting, drawing, sculpting; creating poetry and drama, acting in or directing a movie, insight, research and reasoning, gathering evidence, ordering and writing or presenting a paper, a case, or an argument, these and all the other skills we admire, strive for, and value) depend utterly, from moment to moment, on the proper flow of blood through the brain.

Because the coin of life has its tenacious upside, I discovered that God has equipped our bodies and brains with a remarkable capacity for recovery. Within a short time after the afflicted cells died, other cells in that region began trying, as it were, to rewire the connections. My left leg, which had also gone, quickly came back to full function. And now, after months of therapy and practice, my left-dominant arm and hand can do most of the things they could do before. Most, but not all. I am saddened by what I can't do, and struggle, in the words of one of my own hymns, to "step from the past and leave behind its disappointment and its grieving" so that I can say, every day, "This is a day of new beginnings."¹

And yet, even after such a recovery, for which I thank God, it remains true that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." This means that someday, later or sooner, in one way or another, it will become clear that my body, and every body, is mortal and therefore perishable.

How does this perishable body acquire imperishability? A colleague tells me that in the background here is probably, though indirectly, the language and practice of baptism. Perhaps language like this: coming up naked out of the water, from death into life, the new disciple of Jesus-Messiah was met by someone of their own gender, holding a white robe in which they were to be clad. Because two people were involved it can be said that you "put on this robe," but it is equally true that you were "clothed with it." And in the context of 1 Corinthians 15, "clothed with imperishability" is, I think, theologically preferable.

The problem with saying "put on" is that it may encourage us to think that somehow, we will have a hand in it. But the biblical witness—and Paul's witness—is that when we die, we *perish*. When Brian Wren dies, there won't be a soul or essence of Brian that can say to itself, "Aha! Trumpet time! This is when I put on imperishability."

Paul knows, and I know, that when I die, I perish. There won't be a surviving soul or essence of Brian able to do anything for Brian. To adapt for serious use what was originally comic,² "Brian Wren" will be deceased, defunct, demised. He will be no

more. He will have expired, run down the curtain, shuffled off this mortal coil and gone to that undiscovered country from whose Bourne no traveler returns. He will have returned to the dust from whence he came and evaporated into the elements. Hamlet's famous worry, "To be, or not to be?" will no longer be a valid question for me because I will have *ceased* to be.

This biblical witness, Paul's witness, seems to me realistic, appealing, and in an odd way, comforting. Death truly is the end of life – Period – or in British punctuation, "Full Stop." If there is "resurrection," whatever that means, resurrection is something that God accomplishes. In the words of a great Reformation slogan, resurrection is *sola gratia* (by grace alone). It is God's grandest "day of new beginnings," our ultimate Commencement.

"Resurrection" is communal, not just individual. Paul was writing to a contentious yet Spirit filled *community* described as part of the body of Christ. His letter was prompted by conflicts that Paul wanted to see resolved (Chapter 1). He called on the wealthy members to show consideration for the poorer members (Chapter 11). The Spirit's gifts to individuals were intended to build community (Chapters 12-14). Though Paul is certainly aware of individual gifts and responsibility, his mindset is probably much more communal than ours. Whatever "resurrection" means, the resurrected will not be a crowd of North American individualists strolling through a heavenly mall sporting angelic logos and making personal style choices about the afterlife. They will be as interconnected and inter-dependent in God's new creation as they were in this life, as interconnected and inter-dependent as I am with everyone who has made me who I am and made it possible for me to return from illness and be here today.

Regarding that new creation, Paul's language is suggestive in ways he could not have foreseen. "We will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" is about as close as you can get, in pre-scientific language, to "in *no time* at all," which to a post-Einstein ear suggests "not in space-time as we know it."

So, is it true that "the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed?" I have met and walked with a number of people who have full assurance that Paul's witness is true and who walk in that assurance. They are blessed. They are an inspiration. I am glad to know them.

But I am not among them. The Holy Spirit has not given me that assurance. I don't know why. Perhaps it has something to do with my upbringing, temperament and personality. Perhaps if I had full assurance that these things are true, I wouldn't need to keep exploring our faith in poetry, liturgy, and language. All I would need to do would be to write something like

"Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!"

and close the book. Nothing more would need to be said.

For whatever reason, then, the gift of assurance has not been given to me. What then do I do? One thing I do is remember the times, few but compelling, when the Divine has intervened in my life: a visual impression of Jesus on the Cross calling me to full-time service; a terrifying Presence warning me against wrong-doing; and a quiet

voice showing me a way out of a moral wilderness.

Another thing I do is to mark the signs of God's presence in the lives of my adult daughter and son, who have found their own way to Christian faith and belonging, and in the joys and struggles of dear and true friends. And I thank God for my spouse who chose to love me at a time when the evidence indicated that I was not a good risk as a potential partner, a decision she renews every day as in her love I meet, every day, the grace of God.

Last but not least, *I trust the testimony*. In this case, it is the testimony of Paul, the devout Jew, assuredly in touch with the reality of which he speaks, who was stopped in his tracks by the Risen Christ and sent as Christ's apostle to the Gentiles, including Gentiles like me.

I trust that Paul's testimony is true. And I believe that the truth of it is richer, more complex, more complete, more inclusive, more multi-dimensional, more multi-faith and more all embracing than anything that we, within space-time, can know, think or imagine.

Notes

1. Brian Wren, "This Is a Day of New Beginnings," *Faith Renewed*, (Hope Publishing Company, 1993).
2. Monty Python, Dead Parrot Sketch, BBC-TV (<http://wikipedia.org/wiki/DeadParrot>).