

The Body of Christ II: Death and Resurrection

Stephen Mitchell

The older I become, the less inclined I am to watch violent films. It's not the blood and guts: I'm fascinated by operations and dissections and I'm not queasy. I just don't want to watch fictionalised abuse and terror anymore. It's strange, contradictory even, when I consider that each year for most of my life I've spent an hour, often three hours, reflecting on Jesus' death. Regularly, since I was a child, I've been immersed in settings of the Passion narrative by Bach and when I've led Good Friday Meditations, I've found them to be some of the most creative and inspiring moments of my ministry.

Some may say this all goes to show that Christians are more obsessed with death than life. Believers may not, today, indulge in the more extreme practices of self-flagellation but most churches do have images and statues depicting Jesus' body nailed to a gibbet. Some have Stations of the Cross spelling out in grim detail the journey to the scaffold. The gospel writers also focus on the last days and hours of Jesus' life. About a third of each gospel is taken up with an account of his arrest, trial and execution.

Perhaps this isn't surprising. After all, we tell and retell the tales of our loved ones' deaths. Lucy had Motor Neurone Disease and was finding it hard to breathe. The doctor said there was nothing he could do. She pointed to her letterboard: M-O-R . . . 'I can give you morphine,' he interrupted, 'but it will kill you'. She nodded.

I should say this conversation was not as brutal as it sounds. Lucy was a trained health visitor and had worked as a hospital manager. She knew, as he knew, what was being said and what was being asked. So hers was a 'good death', euthanasia, you might say. I confess too that when my wife died later that day, her breathing having been considerably eased, I had no idea what to do. Even after 40 years of ministry, and sitting by the bedside of many dying parishioners, sometimes administering the Last Rites, standing beside her corpse, I was lost. Fortunately there is a very good government website!

In the December issue of *Sofia*, I discussed some uses of the phrase 'the Body of Christ': its association with the community of faith, the church and its relation to the bread of the

communion service. Kathleen McPhilemy's poem, 'Pietà', followed my article, and reminds us that as we approach Passiontide and Easter, the Body of Christ becomes significant for believers in a very physical way:

She holds his body in her arms . . .
a man's body

It's a body that was subjected to mockery and torture, bearing wounds that have been the subject of devotion for centuries. Crucifixion is certainly not a good death, it's slow and painful. There have, of course, been many equally agonising and prolonged deaths and more disfigured and mutilated bodies, many never having been lovingly cradled. Any worthwhile reflection on the death of Jesus will bring to mind today's victims of abuse and torture. To recognise the cruelty that human beings are capable of, to see what we ourselves are capable of inflicting on others and acknowledging our own mortality is part of the process of facing the reality of human life, overcoming the fear of death and dying, and making the most of our lives.

After Jesus' death, and after his body had been taken down from the cross, Mary and her companions dressed this human body for burial. According to all four Gospels, Joseph of Arimathea took charge of the body and in Matthew's Gospel, has it laid in his own tomb.

Whatever our beliefs, respect for the corpse is a mark of our humanity. The ground-breaking TV dissection *My Dead Body*, shown earlier this year featuring Toni Crews, a young woman who died of a rare form of cancer, was remarkable not only for her bravery in giving advanced permission for the making of the programme, but also in the care and dignity shown by pathologists and students alike.

Far, far more important than any discussion about resurrection, life after death, immortality, the soul or reincarnation, is the practical business of dying well and care of the physical human body. All the more so, for those of us who believe there is no duality between body and soul and between life and life after death.

Today people talk about the soul and of their loved ones who 'have passed' and assume this is

all part of Christian belief. It isn't. Traditional Christianity also rejects this dualism. When I contributed a chapter to *God and Reality* (edited by Colin Crowder), I confidently asserted that 'The immortality of the soul has never been a Christian doctrine'. The publishers (Mowbray) were less certain and said they would have to check with Lambeth Palace. The text remained unchanged! Christian creeds and tradition prefer to speak of the resurrection of the body and even then, only at God's choosing.

For many inside and outside the church, it is thought that at the heart of Christian belief is the question 'What happened to Jesus' body?' Indeed some contend that unless one can affirm that this dead, human body came to life again in a physical way, one has no right to call oneself a Christian. This too is false.

There are two kinds of story in the gospels – accounts of an empty tomb, and stories telling of encounters with Jesus after his death. Even the House of Bishops of the Church of England recognised that 'scholarship can offer no conclusive demonstration' that Joseph of Arimathea's tomb was empty that first Easter Day and that 'the divergent views to be found among scholars of standing are reflected in the thinking of individual bishops'. This appears in their statement of 1986, *The Nature of Christian Belief* published after the row over the then Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, who declared that the resurrection was not a 'conjuring trick with bones'.

The stories of the disciples meeting with Jesus after his death make the same point: Jesus was not resuscitated. Definitions of resuscitation include 'the instance of reviving someone from apparent death or from unconsciousness'. Resuscitation does not follow death but 'apparent death' or 'unconsciousness'. Christians believe that Jesus died and was buried and the encounter stories do not tell of Jesus being brought back to his original physical body. The Risen Jesus in the gospels certainly eats and speaks and is recognised by his followers, and (according to John) bears the wounds of his execution. But this body can do what no physical body is capable of doing – suddenly appearing and disappearing, passing through walls and flying up into the sky.

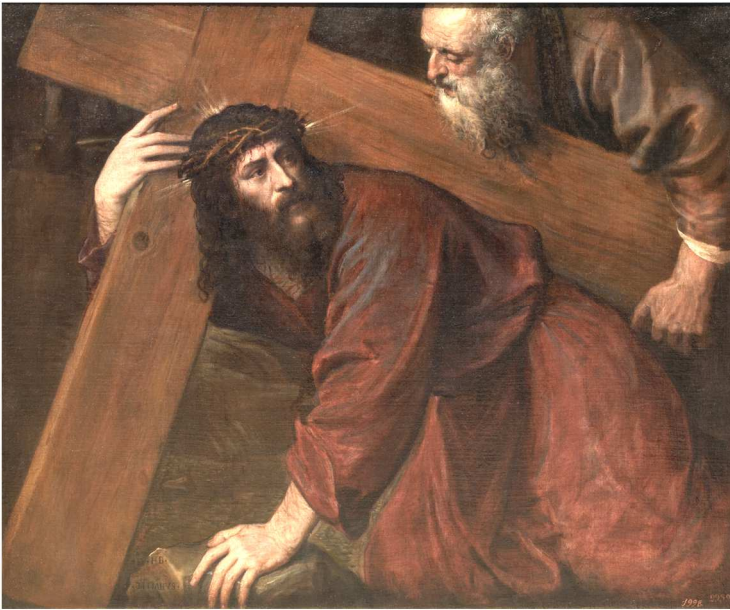
Asked if I believe in the physical rising of Jesus' body from the tomb, I respond by asking what exactly it is I am being asked to believe. What is described in the gospels is not a real,

physical body. It is a literary creation and therein lies the simple explanation for this 'glorified' body. To fulfil the evangelists' brief, the body has to be such that Jesus can be recognised and yet not allow the disciples to say, 'Oh! We thought you were dead. You've been resuscitated like Lazarus. Marvellous! How are you?' Nor must they say 'Oh no! We've seen a ghost, an apparition has come to haunt us.'

The Gospel writers are not seeking to describe, as newspaper reporters, the events of the first Easter Day. They wish to confirm that after Jesus' death, the disciples who had been demoralised and afraid discovered new energy and courage and the desire to talk publicly about the things they had seen and heard. The evangelists want to explain that the power they witnessed in Jesus' ministry was somehow present in their lives, that in their communities and celebrations, in breaking bread together and bringing light and power to those in darkness, they were experiencing what they could only describe as the presence and power of the Risen Christ. Christ, for them, is alive, he is risen, ascended, glorified and this is what their resurrection stories seek to express.

Paul also makes it clear that resurrection, for him, is something that happens, indeed has already happened to members of his newly created church communities. 'We were buried with him by baptism into death' he writes, 'in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.' At times his language is audacious: 'We are always carrying around the death of Jesus in our bodies, so that the life of Jesus may be clearly shown in our bodies.' 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me'. For many this kind of language is meaningless and unhelpful and they want to return to more everyday speech. But however we choose to talk about death, and whatever rituals we use at the point of death, they must help us to grieve and face the reality of death.

In December's article I argued that the everyday chit-chat of some contemporary liturgies, failed to convey the richness of faith. The same is true of many religious and secular funerals. How quickly I have found the bereaved asking for A Celebration of a Life when I've gone to arrange a funeral. Indeed, but in that celebration they must also mourn a death. How easily



Titian: Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus. museodelprado.es

some say their loved one is in their hearts and life is now full of the many happy memories they made together. Yes, but those memories will also be of lost physical engagement and intimate touching. They tell me they rejoice with the deceased who is reunited with family, dancing again, joking and laughing as before. Perhaps, perhaps not, but it may take time, considerable time, to come to terms with hurts caused by those who were close to us and time to accept our neglect in their care and friendship. There must be space to be angry, time to judge, time to grieve.

At my Exit Interview (not, I hasten to add, with the international organisation founded by Philip Nitchke) I rather arrogantly told my bishop that I was looking forward to exploring a life of faith outside the Christian community. Don't get me wrong. Despite its many abuses, I love the church and its rituals and symbolism. It's been part of my life over seventy years and helped to make me who I am. I was certainly tired of administrating and re-organising fifteen parishes but I'd become increasingly fed up with explaining that religious language is poetic, weary of explaining to people both inside and outside the church what is and what is not part of traditional belief.

Now, in retirement I attend more funerals than I take and most are led by celebrants rather than priests. I have no objections to humanist celebrants, indeed I was one for a while, that is until the BHA discovered that I was a priest and banned me! Creating a ritual centred on the celebration of the deceased life is good but I miss the brutal reality of the words of the Burial Service. 'In the midst of life we are in death'. For the bittersweet nature of life and love, gives death meaning and makes it something infinitely precious to us.

Irony on the Via Dolorosa?

Jerusalem

Caroline Pickard

Beside the Fourth Station of the Cross along the route ascribed to Jesus on his way to crucifixion is an Israeli check point. We sat in the cafe opposite and watched as young Palestinian males were routinely stopped and searched, often up against the wall behind, as their ID details were taken by the military. Even a lad of about 12 or 13, passing with his family was subjected to this, reassured on release with an arm around his shoulder from his mother.

What was interesting, and to me shocking, were the reactions of some of the pilgrim groups as they passed. There were smiles, thumbs up for the

soldiers and selfies taken. We challenged one member of such a group asking why she thought the soldiers were there and got 'Yeah, well, yeah' and a shrug. Would it have been so very different two thousand years ago? Was the situation then, a violent military Roman occupation, so very different from the one imposed today by the Israeli authorities? And it's hard to challenge authority, religious or military; it's easier to ignore it. As it was then, so is it now.

I shook the hand of one young man as he was released and I felt just a little bit like Simon of Cyrene.

For several years Caroline has been picking olives in support of Palestinian farmers during the October harvest. She has experienced first hand the violence visited upon the Palestinians on a daily basis by the illegal Israeli settlers. carolinepickard6@gmail.com