

Romans 8: 18-23

[18] I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. [19] For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. [20] For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope [21] that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

[22] We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. [23] Not only so, but we who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

Luke 20:27-44

[27] Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. [28] "Teacher," they said, "Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. [29] Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. [30] The second [31] and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. [32] Finally, the woman died too. [33] Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?"

[34] Jesus replied, "The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. [35] But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, [36] and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection. [37] But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' [38] He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive."

[39] Some of the teachers of the law responded, "Well said, teacher!" [40] And no one dared to ask him any more question

What happens to us after death?

This New Testament passage opens up for us the question of resurrection or as it says in the Good News translation "rising from death". This is, I believe, something which many people are interested in but is rarely seriously addressed in modern society---so what happens to us after death?

When someone close to us is very ill or has in fact died it is natural that we continue to be concerned for their wellbeing in death. In the Uniting Church funeral liturgy are the words "we affirm the Christian conviction that death is not the end but a new beginning". My hope is that when those close to us die they are in God's care and do attain that new beginning.

However the more I have thought about this subject the more complex it seems. But I think the reading from Luke may help some of these thoughts. The reading begins by saying that the Sadducees, who in Jesus' day were a priestly aristocratic group, did not believe in the resurrection.

There were many streams of thought in Judaism then and in particular there were varying interpretations of what happens to us all after death. At the time of Jesus the mainstream of Jewish thought believed that those who were dead were in a sort of limbo but that the time was coming when God would intervene to save his chosen people and there would be a general resurrection of past generations who would then participate in a judgment and hopefully qualify for God's salvation.

The Sadducees apparently did not hold with this scenario and therefore put up this rather far-fetched case to try to prove that the idea of resurrection would encourage a woman in her resurrection life to have seven husbands---something which would be clearly unlawful (and probably for those of you who are married women, rather undesirable!).

It should be noted that under the Jewish law it was of the utmost importance for a man to leave a son and heir. And the law stipulated that if a man died without any children it was the responsibility of any unmarried brother of his to marry the widow in an attempt to fulfill this obligation of heir ship.

Jesus replies in two parts to this rather fanciful argument disputing resurrection. Firstly he attacks the basis of the claim by stating that in the resurrection life conditions are so different that human relationships are raised to a completely new level. Questions of marriage and the bearing of children are irrelevant and misconceived. Resurrection life bears little resemblance to our present life. It is a totally new life says Jesus and we can't really imagine it. It is beyond our experience.

The second thing Jesus says is related to God's promise to the Jewish patriarchs---the revered former leaders of the Hebrew people. God, says Jesus, established a covenant with these people and with those who come after and this covenant is not broken by death. Through the covenant God remains faithful and loving and death does not negate that or defeat that.

The second point is better understood by noting the difference between immortality and resurrection. This is something that I believe is fundamental to our understanding of Christian resurrection. Immortality is basically an understanding that says there is a part of us, the soul or spirit, that doesn't die---a part that goes on even though our physical bodies are gone.

This understanding of immortality, which many people have and tends, wrongly, to be seen as synonymous with resurrection, comes from Greek philosophical thought which maintained that we are made up of two parts---matter or flesh on the one hand and soul/spirit on the other. The Greek understanding was that whilst matter (flesh) was subject to evil and decay, the spirit or soul had the ability to reach the eternal. With this understanding it is only

matter that dies---the soul/spirit is immortal and lives on regardless of what happens to the flesh.

This Greek philosophical understanding is rather different to the Jewish and Christian belief about resurrection, as I understand it. The Jewish understanding of our makeup is that we are far more integrated than the Greek philosophers would have it. Our bodies, our spirit, our personalities, whatever you like to call it, cannot be divorced from each other. We are an integrated whole.

In the Bible when the Greek word “soma” is used it is translated as “body”. But it really means this one integrated whole, which is all of us---our personalities, our communicating ability, our spirituality as well as the outward physical flesh that you see.

The English word “body” doesn’t really adequately translate what is meant by “soma”.

Now this has obvious implications for our belief about what happens to us when we die. In the Jewish (and Christian) understanding when we die all of us dies. Death is fatal. There is not part of us—an immortal soul or spirit---that lingers on. We are dead. Finished. Nothing left.

This is where the impact of resurrection—raising to new life—comes: because we are completely reliant on God’s power to give us this new life.

If we have an immortal spirit as ancient Greek philosophy would have it, then we don’t need God to raise us up---we can do it for ourselves. It is only if death is absolutely fatal that there can be a resurrection.

In the Apostle’s Creed it says that Jesus was crucified, he died and *was buried*. We need to note the seriousness of this word *buried* not only for Christ but also for ourselves. It is more comforting to rationalize that it is not “we” that shall be buried but only a comparatively unimportant part of us---the physical body. That is not what the creed implies. It is not only our physical body, as in the Greek understanding, that dies, but all of us.

It is the same Jesus Christ who suffered, who died, who was buried and was resurrected. But he was *buried*---his whole personality was removed from the earth. The miracle of the resurrection is that God had the power to raise him up---to bring out of that death---out of that complete removal---new life. God is not defeated by death.

It is only if we take the *buried* in the Gospel stories and in the creed seriously, it is only if we understand that death is fatal, that we can understand the difference between immortality—a Greek philosophical understanding—and resurrection—a Christian understanding.

If only a part of us dies and something lingers on—some spiritual part of us—then we don’t need God to raise us up. As with many aspects of our life we are again trying to do it all for ourselves—to obtain eternal life on a do-it-yourself basis—bypassing God.

But if we believe that Jesus died—was dead—utterly finished—and that death—that finitude—did not defeat God—we begin to understand about resurrection life. How this new life may come about is, of course, heavily dependent on your concept of God and remains a mystery. But it can give us immense hope for our loved ones and ourselves. Nothing can separate us from God's love.

But there is yet another very, very important aspect to this question of the nature of resurrection and one which sits well with me. It reflects Paul's theology in the reading we had earlier in Romans Chapter 8. Brisbane Anglican Priest and theologian Greg Jenks makes the crucial point that we cannot limit the conversation about resurrection only to human survival after death.

Specific challenges to traditional religious views include astronomy with so many insights into the origins and immensity of the universe, while at the other end of the scale, are advances in our knowledge of the human genome that reveal an extensive DNA overlap between human beings and other life forms.

We thus can't limit any conversation about the resurrection to human survival after death whilst ignoring the larger web of life of which we are a part.

As with so much of what takes place in our self-obsessed society we reduce the thought of eternal life down to ourselves as individuals. We privatize the resurrection. But says Jenks surely this is far too narrow an interpretation. Jenks talks of how the promise of eternal life relates to the transformation of the whole of God's creation.

If it relates only to us as individuals, to quote Jenks "it represents a tragic domestication of God and reduces the mythic significance of Easter to a 'fire insurance' policy."

Jenks says, and I wholeheartedly agree, that we need to reclaim Paul's vision of cosmic salvation extending to the whole of creation.

It is a broad and generous vision---to pray and work for the coming of God's kingdom, to pray and work for the resurrection of all creation.

The vision of our Christian communities needs to ensure that the dangerous memory of Jesus is kept alive and the future of what Jesus started is being lived out for the whole of creation.

I say, so be it!! Amen