

## Epiphany 7

Today a simple question: what happens to you when you die? The answer is perhaps not so simple.

Our reading from 1 Corinthians 15 is one of Paul's impossibly obscure passages – a passage I am sure he delighted in writing. It is about death and resurrection. Controversial, difficult to understand. It purports to answer this question of what happens to our bodies when we die.

I remember when my mother died back in the 1990's. Emily, my daughter, now 31 asked: "where is grandma?" and "What happens when we die?" Well, Emily answered her own question. She is in heaven. And that was fine for an 8 year old. It was a good answer. Heaven is a good place. It is good grandma is there. . . however we might understand heaven. Paul however, asks a more blunt question – vs 35 "How are the dead raised?" Then, as now, we want to know the mechanics of it all. We know our body is placed in the ground, or is burnt to ashes. So what happens. What do we Christians believe about our dead body and resurrection?

Before we can understand Paul's answer, we must know something of the Jewish attitude to the body – our body. Two things can be said.

The first is that the body is not divided up into different bits, categories or parts such as the physical bit here and the spiritual bit over there; or the body and the soul. To divide the body up in this way is a very Greek, metaphysical idea – which we even in the church seem to have taken over. We say, I even have been known to say, there is the physical bit – the arms, legs, organs etc and then the soul. This Greek idea provides a good solution to the question to our problem. So we say it really is only the physical body that dies, but the soul, the spirit lives on.

That idea was foreign to Hebrew people. They did not deny there was a spiritual side of life. Paul says as much in our reading. However, the spiritual and the physical are all mixed up together in the body. The issue for the Jews was not the continuation of the spiritual, the soul, at the time of death – but whether there was a resurrection of the body. The question was not: was there life (or the continuation of life) after death? It was: was about the resurrection of the body? Indeed as you might know, one Jewish group at the time of Jesus, the Sadducees – did not believe in resurrection. Other Jews, such as the Pharisees, did believe in the resurrection of the body. Paul was a Pharisee. So you can thus understand his question is "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" It is the Jewish version of the question about life after death.

There is a second thing to note about the Hebrew understanding of the word "body". We today have a very individualistic understanding of body. Today at church there are 15(?), 20 bodies. There are 15, 20 individuals here. Our body, any body, is seen to be completely distinct from other bodies. Yes for Hebrews, we are physically separate from each other, but we all, as children of God, and as a people specifically blessed, are all linked – whether we go to synagogue or not. The view is, we are all part of the one body. Even though we might have our own body, we each need the other to have a full personality, to have our true identity. To have a complete body. It is like 'it takes a village to raise a child' but more so.

So for the Jews – and I have heard Cathie even attest to this – unlike our modern society where we prize our individuality or our privacy – we are 'some-body' because we live in a community, a wider body of people. So in our context – the resurrection of the body has corporate or communal aspects to it. The communion of saints (as we say in Holy Communion) is an important aspect of this resurrected body.

But back to Paul.

Paul, along with most of the early church, anticipated the early return of Christ. The Parousia. The second coming. True another impossible idea for our modern world view to get our heads around. Although another way of considering all this is to think of 'completion': it is the time when 'God will be all in all'. What was begun in Jesus, with his teaching of love (like the reading from Luke today) will be completed, fully realised. It is the vision we should all live in hope for – this vision draws us forward and lets us see past the mess we currently are in to a better world on this planet, and possibly beyond. However, we express this idea of completion - all wrapped up in our understanding of Jesus, the problem was, it hadn't happened. So if I were to say, that the second coming is going to happen at 10.00 am Eastern Summer Time tomorrow, most - I trust all – would still be around to be a part of it. This was also the working assumption of the early church: most would be alive to see the return of Christ and the fulfillment of his mission. However, as this was seemingly delayed (there is even a passage in 2 Peter trying to explain why there is a delay), the question arose, what happened for those who died before Christ's return? And this actually was the issue or the context of the question asked in vs 35. How are the dead raised if they die before "God being all in all." After all, our body is not just a lone individual thing – it is part of that wider body of believers and followers of Jesus. I would be missing out on their contribution to my resurrected body, if they are not raised. The question again "how are the dead raised?"

Well good old Paul – in his own tempestuous way – replies: 'Fool!' To even ask such a question is to misunderstand what is involved.

Now to understand this response, we have to keep in mind three dates – and also some of the other teaching of Paul. . . especially out of Romans. The first date is becoming a Christian – which obviously for first generation Christians, and for us as well, is our baptism. The second date is our death. The third is when God will be all in all. The end of the age, the return of Christ – however, you wish to understand it.

For Paul the two crucial dates are actually baptism and the parousia. Put simply it is at baptism the resurrection of the body – the resurrection of that whole physical/spiritual person starts. The resurrection of the body happens while we are still alive. It is when Christians put on Christ, a new person is created by the water and the spirit. The old body begins to pass away (that old solidarity with the sin of the world) and the new creation begins – with its ultimate incorporation into the body of Christ, with all those other believers. Here are some verses we often read at a baptism (Romans 6:3-4):

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

The completion of this process is the Parousia, when God is all in all. Our death is along that journey of having that new life with Christ. Again as Paul says in our passage

What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it raised in glory. It is sown in weakness it raised in power.

So death here is downplayed, but still very relevant. The dissolution of our old body does take place. As Paul points out – resurrection does not mean that the old body - complete with its limbs, grey hair, artificial knee, coughs and memory loss - just comes back to life. According to Paul – again from Romans

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, **the redemption of our bodies**.

Just because we have been baptised and are now dead, we do not escape the sighing and groaning which we all must await for God being all in all. As the author of the book of Revelation says – the cry of the dead in Christ still goes up ‘How Long’ while the powers of this age are still active. Again that passage often read at funerals, Romans 8, says ‘Nothing separates us from the love of Christ – and remember the words – neither death nor life will separate us from that love.

This is all difficult. And I have not really described a process as to what happens when we die. . . as if I could. Our imperishable (perhaps read spiritual) bodies – granted at Baptism – continue. Our identity continues (and not so much our bodily functions)- and that identity is enriched as it becomes a part of the body of Christ.

An illustration: consider a provincial city like Maryborough in Queensland. A place where I have been a minister. To say the least this town has had a chequered history. It was originally a port till the boats got bigger and the river silted up. However, it was then a timber town – but it over-logged and that changed. It had a manufacturing base – and that then went overseas. True it struggles today as do many provincial cities in Australia do, but with each death, it sought to renew itself. Same city, same people – different character. This city in midst of dying finds new life. Maryborough is quite clearly no longer a port, or timber town or a manufacturing town. Yet it still lives. Now consider another scenario. Way back, there was, say, a catastrophic flood. Wiped out the town. Dead. Then years later, on the ruins of the old town a new town is built. This new Maryborough is not the same as the old. It is different city – not a renewed city. It is a different body. The death, the flood, was the end. Nothing survives. Paul is not talking like that – resurrection is not a new start, a reincarnation as our Hindu and Buddhist brothers and sisters believe. Death is a part of an ongoing spiritual process commenced while we are living and still awaits ultimate fulfillment when as Paul dramatically says: ‘The trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed.’ (52)

At death our uniqueness will be still known by God; and for us who remain – those who die are “with the faithful of every time and place, joining with choirs of angels and the whole creation” as our Communion service says. However, those who die are not still flesh and blood (located now in some in some pleasant land in the sky or a child just born on the other side of the world), but they are the resurrected ‘body’ of grandma or Uncle Harry awaiting, like we are too, for the final fulfilment of the vision of Christ when God will be all in all.