

**That Irresistible Resurrection Process
Which He Has Begun
Remembrance Sunday
8 November 2009**

When the undertaker came to see my siblings and me about the arrangements for our Father's funeral last February we were astonished when she showed us the brochure listing all the kinds of coffins you can choose from. Some people apparently have the Canterbury colours painted on their casket, while others have the same paint designs as their boy racer cars.

We were rather more traditional in the arrangements we made for the funeral here at Holy Trinity. Some people said to me, "how can you take your own Father's funeral," to which I replied, "that is the easy part, it is what comes afterwards that will be difficult." And so it has proved to be – not just the complications over bank accounts, the will, and property arrangements, and there have been plenty of them – but also the unpredictable emotional consequences.

Grief is a strange business, taking each of us in a different way. For me it has been a matter of exhaustion creeping up on me at unexpected times, and leaching me out from within. For my sister it has been a matter of feeling invisible at times, as though people could walk through her.

Our Service this morning is a marker of where each of us who lost someone in the last year has got to along the way of relinquishing our attachment to the earthy life of the person we loved, who has gone from us. In her book *The Year of Magical Thinking* novelist Joan Didion reflects on what it was like to live through the year after her husband suddenly

collapsed and died, thus ending a 40 year marriage. She writes at the end of it:

I know why we try to keep the dead alive: we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us. I also know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead. Let them become the photograph on the table. Let them become the name on the trust accounts. Let go of them in the water.

But if this Service is no more than a passing salute to them, and a chance for us the grieving to lick our emotional wounds, then it will sell us short, and the God whose loving, mysterious presence dwells in this Church.

We live in a time when unbelief is able to emerge into the clear light of day, and declare its bleak, nihilistic credo in brazen ways. There are those who would heartily agree with the catchy line in the T S Eliot poem that goes:

Birth, copulation and death,
That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all,
Birth, copulation and death,
I've been there, and once is enough,
Birth, copulation and death.

This morning we heard Paul addressing almost exactly the opposite problem as he writes to a bunch of super spiritual Christians at Corinth, who believe that all the good things God has in store for us have happened for them already. They see themselves as members of a kind of spiritual aristocracy who have got beyond the petty concerns of the body, and so what happens to the body after death doesn't greatly interest them. They have reduced the Christian faith to a self-centred spiritual development

programme. To put it mildly they are living in a cocooned fantasyland, in which they have shut out the grimmer aspects of reality, including the grim reaper.

Paul won't duck the truth of the death of our bodies. He invites the Corinthians to lift their gaze away from their here and now focus on a me, me, me spirituality, to the future glory coming our way from God, that will involve everything and everyone around us. He uses an agricultural analogy from harvest time. If we see that the first fruits of the crop are ripe, then we can be certain that the rest of the harvest is due – it's full growth and final flowering has an irresistible and unstoppable momentum behind it. The resurrection of Jesus Christ has been the starting gun on this process. Now nothing will ever be the same again for our world and its inhabitants.

If the Corinthians spiritual pathologies are so different to ours, then the diagnosis and remedy, which has been supplied, is in fact very useful to us. For it gets our focus away from the assumption that we just live out our days, and then, if we are lucky, get our own personal resurrection as an add on extra. To just look at our personal destiny in that reduced kind of a way would be to ignore and miss out on the rather more comprehensive and big picture agendas that God is working to with our world and us.

Imagine the story of the human race as a two-act drama, in which there are three main actors. Act one started with earthman, otherwise known as Adam, a representative character for all of us. This act ends in sadness and tragedy, because early on in the story a powerful character emerged called Death,

who blighted all the hope and happiness that was around. His dominating presence was very much in control as act one finished, and as act two got under way.

Act two starts with an introduction to a new character, heavenly man, otherwise known as the second Adam. As the story develops it turns out that he is a kind of model, pattern, character description, and blue print for the way all the other characters are supposed to be, in their own particular way of course. If earthman hadn't made a hash of things in act one he would have been rather like this. Act two starts in a very striking and happy way because we now see a character displaying a kind of radiating attractiveness that shows that here is someone who finally understands the script and the plot lines of the story.

Of course our old friend Death isn't going to stand for that, and clutches second Adam in his embrace, in a little story that revolves around a judicial murder. But Death has badly misjudged the situation. For the second Adam is also the heavenly man. Therefore Death can't contain him for long, much less snuff him out forever. As that tomb outside Jerusalem radiates light, as the stone is rolled away, as the heavenly man comes out of it, the last enemy death has been dealt a fatal blow.

From now on he is in retreat, his influence diminishing, his power on the wane. Now a new race is emerging from within the ranks of the human race. Their lives are patterned on those of the second Adam. They are developing into junior versions of the heavenly man. Although death mows them down as part of the evolutionary engine that drives life on planet earth, it does not have the last

say on who and what they shall be. For a series of events have been set in motion that will climax with the second coming of Christ; when he will raise from the dead those who are his.

Listen to these words of Gordon Fee:

Nothing lies outside God's redemptive purposes in Christ, in whom all things will finally be united. Therefore at the death of death the final rupture in the universe will be healed and God alone will rule over all beings, banishing those who have rejected his offer of life, and lovingly governing all those who by grace have entered into God's "rest." ...Christ is the first fruits of those who are his, who will be raised at his coming. That ought to reform the way we currently live, and reshape our worship into seasons of unbridled rejoicing.