

**Future Prospects
Easter 7, Year C
John 17: 20-26
16 May 2010**

In Japan some sections of the funeral industry have embraced audio-visual technology to the max. Catering to adherents of the pure land Buddhist sect, who have highly realised ideas about where they are going after death, they have developed a cremation chapel sound and light show that is amazing. At the climax of the Service, just after the committal, close friends and family wheel the coffin through a three-dimensional image wall that makes it appear that they have entered the pure land after life. They disappear from view into this highly convincing moving image.

Religions that mean business understand that they must have something worthwhile to say about what happens after death. Some have been prepared to go in to great detail about what is on the menu. The Viking Valhalla is a place where warriors fight all day, are continually resurrected after they fall on the battlefield, and where they feast and wench all night in a great banqueting hall. Those involved in New Zealand's gang culture might well find this to be a very attractive option.

Christianity is an infuriating religion that emphatically states that its founder was resurrected, that its followers may well be resurrected, and then refuses to give any more information about what that means. The reality of resurrection is affirmed, but the content is understated.

However, on this Sunday that holds open the tension between Ascension and Pentecost the preacher may well find himself hard pressed not to say something on the subject. As the resurrection appearances come to an end, and as Jesus changes his location in a dramatic fashion, we are left asking where has Jesus gone, and what is he up to now?

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they may always see the glory you have given me before the foundation of the world.

The high priestly prayer, the last will and testament of Jesus, makes it clear that we are to be eventually included in his space and time relocation plan. Which in turn makes the questions I raised a minute ago even more interesting and essential.

In order to find out what Jesus is doing now we need to consider who God is, what time is, and how God touches on time. God is the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That means he has three

different ways of being God, three different ways of stating who he is, and three different ways of engaging with the creation he has made, and the world of creatures within it. There is a sense in which the creation, the worlds, and we the creatures, are the outcome of a conversation that is continually going on within the Trinity.

God made the world, and God is making new creatures all the time. Austin Farrer once defined God as the never-ending source of contrivance and invention. He is as it were brimming over with new life. What is more he begins the work of our salvation, calling Israel in to existence as his people, sending the Son into our world, and reaching out to each one of us to call us and include us in his community of salvation. This originating work is what the Father does. This is the past dimension of creation and salvation.

Jesus the Son, the second person of the Trinity, engages with us in the present. The evangelical events of his life on earth are the stuff and texture of what draws us in to being a Christian. That life, now made widely available in many different ways, is the description of who God is, of what he is like, and of what is intended for us in a new way of being human. To meet God, to be addressed by him in the invitation to a life of faith is to meet this Jesus, who is the here and now dimension of our salvation.

The Holy Spirit is the future dimension of the Trinity. If the Father begins the work of our salvation, and if the Son develops it, then the Holy Spirit completes and perfects it. If we say that one day God will be “all in all” the Holy Spirit is the agent that will make that happen. If we say that one day the Kingdom of God, first proclaimed by Jesus, will be fully realised, will be completely real, then it is the Holy Spirit who brings that about. If we ask where has Jesus gone after his resurrection the answer is that he has gone into the future, the future fashioned by the Holy Spirit where things are as God intends them to be without any compromise, diminution or limitation.

This future is more real than the present or the past. It is if you like that part of the universe where the Holy Spirit has contoured reality around the character and personality of Jesus Christ to be the place and space where he can be most fully himself. This is where he is, where he came from to be with the disciples in the resurrection appearances. This is where we will be in the life of the world to come. It is where the Holy Spirit comes from in its work among us.

Did I say come from – well that is true in one sense, but in a truer sense that future is rushing towards us. It is both drawing us towards it, and also coming over the horizon of time at great speed. For the future has priority, it is more real than the other time

dimensions, because it is the space and the place where things and people become what they were always supposed to be.

And that is where we come in. In this life we are engaged in a process of identity building. The raw ingredients are our past experience and former life histories. The X factor soon to be applied is change and transformation at the hands of God to purify us, to develop us, and to take us to the next level. The Holy Spirit is at work in us to shape what you might call our charismatic identity. We are to become fully realised Spirit filled personalities.

As citizens of heaven, inhabitants of the life of the world to come, and community members of the Kingdom of God there is a particular business that we are to be about. Thomas Aquinas defined that future state of the fully realised Kingdom of God as a well-ordered society whose members ceaselessly contemplate the vision of God. To put it in John's words we will be with Jesus where he is so that we may always see the glory that the Father has given him because the Father loved him from before the foundation of the world. This glory will be shared with us too. Eschatology is the code word for all the things that are to do with this future world of the Holy Spirit. We shall live an eschatologically heightened form of existence. Jesus will be our head, and we shall be the members of his body. The Church will finally have become what it is supposed to be. What we know now only in occasional moments of anticipation in the Eucharist will be then our continual experience. We shall rest and reign with him in heaven.