

About the Resurrection 3 Before Advent 2016 (Luke 20:27-38)

My eye was recently caught by a headline in the Times "Good grief: keep talking to friends beyond the grave." The article explained how a founder of a US technology company had created a virtual version of her partner, who had been killed in a road accident last year. To do this she had fed 8000 lines of text messages sent by her partner into a Google programme that allows people to create their own "chat bots". Now I'm getting a little beyond my own understanding of virtual technology here, but I believe that she and other friends were able to talk to the dead partner, who would respond to their questions in language that mimicked his own speech patterns. Scarey! Many people are apparently now buried with their mobile phones, to which relatives can send messages. Imagine the horror if a message was received back because a number had been reallocated? Then there are the occasions when dead relatives are photoshopped on to pictures of a wedding or other important events. Is this digital Resurrection of a loved one merely a modern way of dealing with grief, as the Times headline suggests, or is it a genuine attempt to create an after life, the desire to be kept in eternal life? Or is it merely a digital version of the ouija board and all hocus-pocus?

Speculation on whether there is an after-life or whether death is the end has been around since there have been people. To explore this idea is basic to human existence. Is life but an empty dream and are we merely players upon the scene? Is this it or is there more to life? Whenever I attend humanist funerals, full of inspiring memories, good humour, photographs, sound recordings of the one who has died, I am always left with a sinking, empty feeling, for hope of life everlasting has been omitted. Living without this hope of resurrection, I believe, cheapens life. . We have Christ's promise of the reality of resurrection through Christ's own resurrection. Because he lives, we too will live. One of my favourite Shakespearean quotes is Hamlet's words to Horatio after he has talked with his father's ghost:

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy."

So what is the nature of the resurrection that Jesus promises? And can we be certain of obtaining it? In this morning's epistle Paul seems to be saying to the Church of the Thessalonians, "Don't waste time worrying about what's to come because many things have to happen first. In the meantime stand firm in your faith in Christ Jesus and get on with being Christians." Pretty good advice. The contemporary belief at this time was that the Day of the Lord would come and God would re-establish Israel in a new world where the dead would be raised and wrongs would be righted. Now, in this morning's gospel, the aristocratic, well to do Sadducees, who were very conservative both religiously and politically, did not believe in the Resurrection, so they put their trick question to Jesus about how life can be meaningful after death. They ask this bizarre question about the widow who marries and outlives all of seven brothers. To whom will she be married come the resurrection? Not too sure about the answer to that, but if things had taken their natural course the widow would surely have been fairly exhausted. It's important to realise the context of this question. We are in the last week of Jesus's life. The leaders of the Temple are trying to bring him down so they can put Jesus on trial for his life. They have already asked questions about his authority, about to whom taxes should be paid and Jesus had turned over the tables of the money lenders in the Temple. Still they couldn't catch him out and nor did they this time.

Jesus replies that resurrection is not about the continuation of now. Resurrection life is different; reproduction is superseded by immortality. It's not about life as we know it with all

its structures and traditions intact. And Jesus goes on to say that if God is our God and we are his people, then death is not the end of the story. God is God of the living, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The new world coming is not like this world at all. We try and understand through human constraints, but these are inadequate. We can't understand things we have not seen; we need faith and hope. And Jesus clearly provides grounds for this faith. "In my Father's house," he told his disciples, "there are many dwelling places." And all those appearances he made in the forty days after his resurrection and before his ascension to assure his disciples that they were witnesses of tremendous life changing events.

In a moment Danielle will be baptised into the family of Christ; she will become a citizen of his kingdom. Jesus is alongside us in eternal life all the time. He is no longer bound by time and space, but walks by our side, having called us into Kingdom citizenship. "Behold!" He says, "I am making all things new." So like ourselves, Danielle, is asked to share Christ's spaciousness, to start from a different place, to steer by a different star, to live on a bigger map, to come to different conclusions, to have different priorities, to enter a new world, a complete revolution. Like us she will become one of the resurrection people and share the Easter hope, which David Hatton simply proclaimed:

"Every year, those despairing,
languishing in the human condition
glimpsed a promise of hope
in the new life of Spring.

Then one year, Hope beckoned
to a death-bound human race
from the open mouth
of an empty tomb."

William Pattinson
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