

Why the Resurrection of the Body?

By Rev. Peter Ryan, S.J. and Janis Clarke

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Fifth Sunday of Lent

Ezekiel 37.12–14
Romans 8.8–11
John 11.1–45

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.” We heard those words on Ash Wednesday, when the priest traced the sign of the cross on our foreheads with ashes. They are a stark reminder of death and what death means. Each of us will eventually die, and our bodies will decompose.

Meditation on the inevitable fact of our death is salutary. It can spur us to live holy lives that prepare us to receive from Jesus the resurrection life we long for. But because death is such a horrible reality, and because we are so easily influenced by the intellectual currents of unbelief, we find ways to distract ourselves from thinking about death.

We become busy about many things to avoid such reflection. We may put off visiting ill and elderly loved ones because they remind us of our own mortality. The tendency in contemporary culture, laments then-Cardinal Ratzinger in his book on eschatology, is to think that death “ought to happen at a stroke, and leave no time for reflection or suffering.” Instead of praying, “From a death that is sudden and unprepared for, deliver us, O Lord,” the culture of unbelief would have us praying just the opposite: “A sudden and unprovided death grant to us, O Lord.”

Two Problematic Theories of Human Nature

Such a “prayer” is understandable for those who have no hope. Materialists, for example, deny not only the existence of God, but also the existence of souls and of any spiritual reality at all. They think the entire universe is simply matter that has evolved into what now exists. Human beings, on this view, are only a complex evolution of matter, and everything about us, including our very knowing and loving, can be reduced to matter in motion. When someone dies, there is absolutely nothing left of the person, and he or she will never exist again.

This view suggests that there is no point in living an upright life. For materialists, nothing, including human life, has intrinsic value, so they tend to place value in preferred states of consciousness. Sometimes we feel good, and sometimes bad, and we naturally prefer to feel good. Materialists conclude that the point of life is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Eat, drink, and be merry in whatever way you please, for tomorrow we die.

This philosophy is aptly expressed in *Les Misérables* – the book, not the musical – in the words of a politician who mocks the faith of the saintly Bishop Bienvenue:

Let us live merrily. Life is all. . . there is no such thing as either good or evil; there is vegetation. . . Shall I exist after death? No. What am I? A little dust collected in an organism. What am I to do on this earth? The choice rests with me: suffer or enjoy. Whither will suffering lead me? To nothingness; but I shall have suffered. Whither will enjoyment lead me? To nothingness; but I shall have enjoyed myself.

Others hold a different but equally extreme view – that of body–self dualism. They claim that the body is not part of oneself at all, but only a vessel or instrument one uses while living in this world. One’s true self is the underlying subject that feels, thinks, and desires. On this view, death is good because it frees the person when the body becomes a burden.

The consequences of dualism for morality are disastrous. If the body is not intrinsic to the person, then bodily acts traditionally regarded as grave violations of personal dignity would be perfectly appropriate. Sexual morality would be determined only by the consent of the parties involved. Contraception, premarital sex, homosexual acts, and even polyamory would be morally acceptable. Physician-assisted suicide would be justified when the body has “outlived its usefulness” and can no longer enable a person to enjoy life.

For the materialist, the self is only matter in motion, and resurrection is impossible. For the dualist, the self is purely spiritual and resurrection is pointless. But what if we are more than matter in motion? And what if our bodies are integral to who we are? Morality would then require us to respect the personal meaning of our whole selves, body and soul. And authentic fulfillment would require resurrection life.

The Deepest Desire

Let’s consider what the Lord is saying to us about this in today’s readings.

With the words “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord,” the psalmist expresses the deepest desire of the human heart – the desire for the fullness of life that can only come with the “plenteous redemption” that includes bodily resurrection.

The Father longs to give us that gift, and he begins to reveal his plan to do so in the Old Testament. The Israelites had strayed time and again, losing faith in the Lord and turning to false gods. The Lord for his part wanted them to know that he alone is God. He passionately desired their faithful love and everlasting communion with him.

What would convince the Israelites – what will convince us – that he is the only true God? What will induce us to turn back to him when we stray? Nothing short of the conviction that if we are faithful, he will fulfill the deepest desire of our hearts. The Old Testament aptly calls this a desire for *shalom* – that peace which is the fullness of life.

Shalom includes all the blessings that comprise human flourishing – lasting friendship with one another and with God, of course, but also bodily life. Scripture hardly recommends a disembodied spirituality. We can enjoy *shalom* only if we are freed from sin and all its spiritual and bodily consequences, including death itself. We need resurrection life!

So, the Lord says through the prophet Isaiah, “Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and have you rise from them.” He adds: “I will put my spirit in you that you may live.” Saint Paul explains how this prophecy will be fulfilled: If the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Jesus and his Father – is in us, then “the One who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit dwelling in you.”

This gift of resurrection life is not automatic. It requires our cooperation. Paul makes it clear that if we are “in the flesh” – if we refuse to believe, fail to live upright lives, and die unrepentant – we will never enjoy resurrection life in God’s kingdom.

Jesus Penetrates Unbelief

Everything Jesus did and said was aimed at eliciting our faith so that we might enjoy that life. This purpose is especially clear in today’s gospel. Jesus tells his apostles, “Lazarus has died. And I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe.” Moreover, as John explains, “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that he was ill, he remained for two days in the place where he was.” If Jesus were only interested in staving off death for a time, he would not have waited but would “have done something so that this man would not have died.”

In short, it was *because* he loved them that he waited. He raised Lazarus to strengthen their faith and ours. He wanted everyone to see that he truly is the Son of God and capable of delivering on his promise to fulfill our deepest desires and share his resurrection life. Jesus worked this spectacular miracle for the same reason he works all of his miracles – to penetrate the walls of unbelief that prevent people of every age from receiving the saving truth that leads to resurrection life.

Just as Jesus broke through the closed and legalistic mindset of his own generation, he desires to free us from patterns of thinking – not least from materialist and dualist anthropologies – that arise from our contemporary culture of unbelief. Those cultural currents can prevent us from opening our hearts to the intimacy with Jesus here and now that leads to resurrection life.

Resurrection life! Those who repent and believe can look forward to the resurrection of their bodies in the new heavens and the new earth – a completely transformed creation! We are connected with creation through our bodies. In this new creation, we will enjoy all the wonderful good that we experienced in this life, but without all the problems and misery we endure here. Our whole selves will be gloriously transformed, and our deepest longings will be fulfilled beyond measure. We will know definitive intimate communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with the angels and saints, and with all of creation forever!

Overcoming Obstacles

This is a powerful message, but fear can nevertheless work to obstruct belief. In the verses following today's gospel, Saint John tells us that the leaders of the people were afraid that everyone would believe in Jesus and that the Romans would respond by taking away their land and their nation. "So from that day on they planned to kill him."

Fear can also prevent people in our day from making a full commitment to the gospel and remaining faithful to Jesus. Despite the appeal of the gospel's promise of resurrection life, many find it extremely difficult to accept specific moral teachings that conflict with the assumptions and practices of contemporary culture. Paul's teaching that "neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6.9-10) goes over like a lead balloon in our secularized society.

Many who are attracted to the Church when they hear about the boundless joys of the kingdom are tempted to turn away when they consider the cost of discipleship – which is really the cost of living a morally upright life. It tends to strike them as a strange bit of bad news within the good news, bad news so difficult to accept that they are tempted to reject the good news.

What can be done about this? Those who are attracted to the gospel need to be strengthened, and an indispensable part of our call to strengthen them is to provide a coherent account of right and wrong, of morally good and bad acts. We need to help people understand the ennobling Christian anthropology that underlies the moral teaching of the Church on specific issues that they are likely to find challenging.

We ourselves and those we would help must, above all, cultivate an intimate personal relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Through the sacraments of the Church and the indwelling Spirit we will be empowered to resist cultural currents of unbelief and exercise authority over our bodies and drives. We will know the joy of finding and embracing God's unique plan for our lives that begins with baptism and leads to everlasting life.

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FOR FURTHER READING

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IN SHORT . . .

- ***The tendency in contemporary culture is to think that death "ought to happen at a stroke, and leave no time for reflection or suffering."***
- ***Materialism and dualism are two false theories of human nature with highly problematic moral implications.***
- ***What if we are more than matter in motion? What if our bodies are integral to who we are?***
- ***We are connected with creation through our bodies.***
- ***Morality thus requires us to respect the personal meaning of our whole selves, body and soul. And authentic fulfillment requires resurrection life.***
- ***Those who repent and believe can look forward to the resurrection of their bodies in the new heavens and the new earth – a completely transformed creation!***