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The Resurrection¹

SHERIDAN GILLEY

'Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have' (Luke 24:39).²

The Christian doctrine of the Resurrection contains both an affirmation and a mystery. We affirm that Jesus rose on the third day from the dead; and we confess a mystery which we cannot wholly understand, a mystery hidden in the secret life of God. For the Christian believes in a God who is essentially mysterious, an ultimate reality only partially penetrable by human understanding, an object only in a limited degree accessible to our reason, and seen even by the mystics through a cloud of mystery. All our statements about God fall short of what he is. In traditional language, they are analogical, apophatic, metaphoric, for they apply the discourse of our material world to the immaterial kingdom of eternity. Religious language, like poetry, uses allegory and typology to describe what merely factual statements cannot do. Our religious convictions are attempts to utter the unutterable, to know the unknowable, to soar into the transcendence of a divine realm which must always lie beyond our reach. God is the 'blessed and only Potentate, . . . dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see' (1 Tim. 6:15-6); and so with the Resurrection – let us proclaim the *mystery* of faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen. When we confess the doctrine of the Resurrection, we affirm the approximate character and inadequacy of our language about it, for what we affirm, we affirm not in mere reason, but on our knees in wonder before the mystery.

And yet Christianity paradoxically rejoices that 'he that hath seen me hath seen the Father' (John 14:9). Our faith is not only a proclamation of a mystery, but also of a revelation in which God has told us something of himself, a revelation given in the language of time and of simple flesh and blood reality. Christ has died, Christ is risen: these are not purely otherworldly statements, they belong to time as to eternity. Not that they are solely addressed to our reason: to say that Christ is risen is to declare the inner power of his risen life, to say that he has spoken to the imagination and the feelings, indeed that he speaks through the heart and conscience to give faith a practical expression, in the way in which we live our lives. Yet the imagination, and the feelings, conscience and even religious practice, are *like* reason, properly considered, in that all give rise to knowledge as they inform and interpenetrate one another, and enlighten us on what is true. Thus God showed himself to the Greeks in human reason, and to the Jews not only in reason but in prophetic utterance and temple sacrifice, and in the practical demands

on conscience of the covenant law and the commandments. The Christian tradition therefore draws on both the philosophy of Hellas and the witness of Israel to affirm a God who addresses our reason and is living and active in the world. Christian revelation is rooted in time and space, in concrete historical particulars, in what God did and said to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their sons and daughters down the centuries. Above all, revelation was given in the person of Christ, the perfection of our humanity, the new Adam, in whom God so loved man that he became one; and in that God not only submitted himself to the hurt and helplessness of our confined condition, but surrendered himself to study by the canons of reason and history.

Yet revelation has not abolished mystery, it is itself mysterious, it concerns the interaction of nature and the supernatural; and so we find in the creeds binding in faith on Christians both high mysterious statements about the ultimate being of God and the simple historical assertion that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate. Christianity speaks prose as well as poetry, the language of fact as well as of value. And then there is that extraordinary declaration, violating, no doubt, all strict canons of philosophical propriety, that Christ also rose 'on the third day': which binds an affirmation about strict historical time into one single affirmation about his being for all eternity.

This, however, only reflects the tension in Christianity between the two realms in which Christians make their professions of belief: of God and man, poetry and history, faith and reason, soul and body, the supernatural and the natural, the world we see and the world to come. It is this which has made Christianity so susceptible to heretical movements which fail to find the proper balance between this world and another. Take the distinction between spirit and flesh: the early Church had to argue against the Gnostic heretics who denied that Christ had a body, and thought that salvation was purely spiritual. The monarchians asserted that Jesus was either a mode of existence of the eternal Father, or a mere man on whom the spirit had rested, adopting him into the life of God. There was a similar difficulty in holding Creator and creation together in the great fourth century conflict over the Father's relation to the Son, and the fifth century controversy over the relation between Christ's divine and human natures. A not wholly dissimilar disagreement arose at the Reformation, when it was disputed whether Jesus was spiritually and substantially or only spiritually present in the sacrament of his body. Modern Arians, Socinians and Unitarians have denied his deity, conservatives wish to confine Christianity to a non-political realm of spirit, while a powerful theological current, deriving from the pietist movement and the Enlightenment, wants to distinguish the Christ of the Church's faith from the Jesus of history. This involves a denial that historical assertions about Jesus can be the foundation for a saving faith, when no kind of certainty can be based on historical evidence which might be

either true or false. On this ground, the Christ of faith can have no firm setting in a time and place, and the Resurrection is nothing more than our faith experience of it, in which we feel ourselves reborn in the power of the Risen Lord. Thus Christianity can be saved from historical and scientific criticism by withdrawal to a realm which is non-scientific and non-historical, which is purely otherworldly, and in this typically modern disassociation of sensibility, the believer becomes a fideist rationalist, asserting in faith what he has found unbelievable in reason.

A similar tendency exists in modern sharp distinctions between religious and scientific language. On this count, what we affirm as poetry is distinct from what we affirm as fact, and traditional theology exists only through a confusion of language, in which an objective pseudo-scientific metaphysic has got mixed up with statements about merely human value. In short, much modern theology puts asunder God and man, poetry and history, spirit and matter, faith and reason, the supernatural and the natural, soul and body, this world and another. Yet these are the very themes which divine revelation and Christ's Incarnation have put together, so that two centuries of liberal theology have simply splintered everything which Christ made one.

I believe that I see the end of this process in the redefinition of Jesus as a timeless Saviour figure, like one of the dying and rising nature Gods of the ancient world. Their acts of redemption took place in an imaginary spiritual realm, and they have no inconvenient and embarrassing location in time, space and history. Let us worship Osiris or Tammuz if Christ's redemption is purely spiritual and non-historical, if all we need is a springtime experience of rebirth, for this commits us to nothing except the experience itself.

Yet the claim of Christianity is that the life and death and rising from the dead of Christ all actually happened: that what we experience as poetry is also true as history; that the poetry *is* history. Christ *did* rise, and that has made a difference to the world as it is, and not merely to the way we feel about it. It is in this, as William Temple put it on another theological theme, that Christianity is the most materialistic of religions,³ an epiphany given through a baby in a crib, through a preaching child, and through a man with a body. It's this obstinate materialism in Christianity which pervades the story of the Resurrection. As God was made man in the body, so he rose from the dead in the body, and in this Rising, the whole of our earthly humanity is redeemed. For our bodies are essential to what we are as human beings; we *are* our bodies, whatever else we are; and so the redemption of the body is a necessary part of our redemption, and if the body is not redeemed, nor is the whole of what has made us human. The Christian faith affirms that Christ has conquered the sins of the body by rising in the body; he has conquered the death of the body by rising from the dead; and he has done this not only through an experience of rebirth in this life, by poetry and metaphor, but in a spiritual and bodily rebirth

into the life everlasting. How can I, poor sinner, be redeemed from the sins of my body unless my Lord is risen in the body? How can I rise from the dead, unless my Lord is also risen? Christianity does not preach a mere immortality of the soul, it preaches the immortality of man, the second Adam, the new creation.

As to the precise philosophical mode of this immortality, there is a mystery. Luke and John both speak of a definite continuity with the flesh: 'handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have' (Luke 24:39; also John 20:27). In one of the earliest pieces of Apostolic witness, Peter declares that the Apostles ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead (Acts 10:41). This was no ghost or phantom, but a living body. St. Paul speaks paradoxically of the resurrection of a 'spiritual body', in which flesh and blood have ceased to be flesh and blood, but have been purified, transformed, exalted and taken up into the eternal (1. Cor. 15). Paul, however, as a former Pharisee, insists on the immortality of the body, in a continuity between the earthly and heavenly body. Thus he stresses the survival of a corporeal aspect of existence, and it is to this, rather than to a metaphysical curiosity about the character of the risen body, that the stories in Luke and John also testify. Christianity is not a philosophy, but a revelation which employs philosophical analysis where it chooses. It is not the precise philosophical definition of the corporeal resurrection body which matters, but the apostolic witness to it, and in that we should be content to assert the fact which the scriptures specifically reveal.

It is this fact,⁴ however, which is the stumbling block and scandal to those spiritually-minded middle class modern Christians whose Christianity I have christened 'spectral', who are somehow embarrassed by the gross materiality of the idea of a Resurrection body. It is here I would locate Jenkinsism, which as a heresy seems to stand somewhere between orthodoxy and modern fideism. The Bishop grants to a debatable degree the historical reliability of some of the Resurrection appearances, certainly those in Paul, if not in the Gospels. It is not clear, however, if he regards the appearances as faith experience, an inner knowledge of having died and risen with the Lord, rather than the actual encounter of seeing, hearing and touching him⁵. The Gospels leave us in no doubt that the 'appearances' were of the latter kind, and that they were the inescapable concomitant of the disciples' experience of rebirth and resurrection. Paul's testimony includes his own vision of the Lord with the appearances to Peter, the Twelve, James, and the five hundred at a time, and that might seem to reduce all these experiences to an appearance in mere inner vision: but as Professor Henry Chadwick declares, 'Paul says that Christ appeared to over 500 brethren at once; and that does not sound a plausible description of a collective private ecstasy or group vision'⁶. No doubt the appearance had something in it of wonder, which made it rather

different from an ordinary spectacle. No doubt sight and insight were conferred at once. Both the Pauline and Gospel testimonies taken together, suggest much more than inner vision, they suggest an experience of seeing, though this may well have involved in some mysterious manner, both an enhancement and a transcending of ordinary sight.

I am not sure, however, that the Bishop does deny the external objective reality of Christ's appearances: what he does refuse to affirm is that the Lord has risen in the body.⁷ It was my theological colleagues learned in the writings of the early Christian Fathers, Gerald Bonner, George Dragas, Peter Forster and Robert Hayward, who alerted me to the Bishop's revival of the old Gnostic heresy that Jesus has not redeemed the body. It is not, however, from Gnostic premisses that the Bishop has arrived at his Gnostic conclusion. His first principle is the Anglican liberal suspicion of miracle, of the spiritual acting on the material in signs and wonders, a liberalism which can only rest on an outdated view of science not now accepted by many scientists, of the natural order as a closed mechanical system: the 'Don Cupittism' which depends on a presumption as all-embracing as Christianity itself.

The Bishop's doubts otherwise arise from the claim that the historical evidence for a bodily resurrection is unclear. Here there is a real difficulty, for the post-resurrection appearances in Paul are difficult to reconcile with the appearances in the Gospels, and the Gospel accounts do contain discrepancies. All the Gospels assert Mary Magdalene's presence at the tomb, but vary the names of the other women, while John mentions the Magdalene alone. Their motives for visiting the tomb also vary, as does what they see: in Matthew, unlike the others, in which the tomb is already unsealed, an earthquake occurs which rolls the stone away. The accounts also differ in the number and position of the angels – a matter which greatly exercises Bishop Jenkins – and what the women said of what they saw. Mark and Luke have an appearance on a country road, in Luke, on the road to Emmaus. Matthew lacks the subsequent appearance in the other evangelists to the disciples at a meal in Jerusalem, and John has two Jerusalem appearances, one a week after the other. The evangelists apart from Luke report the angelic assurance to the women that Jesus had gone into Galilee and, in place of the Jerusalem appearance, Matthew has one to the Eleven on a Galilean mountain. John also has a Galilean appearance to the disciples, but at the sea of Tiberias. There is the further Ascension appearance near Jerusalem in Acts. All these appearances can be placed in sequence, but such harmonization, as by Tatian or Osiander, has never had much encouragement from the Church, and some theologians like Luther almost rejoice in the discrepancies. Yet if harmonization sometimes partakes of the rationalism which it opposes, it is *an* answer to those biblical scholars who stress discrepancies in their highly speculative and sceptical analyses of the history of the text. At

the very least, however, there are central common affirmations in Scripture that the Apostles met the Risen Lord and that on the third day, the tomb was empty. As the Durham scholar H. E. W. Turner puts it, 'while the Tomb without the Visions is blind, the Visions without the Tomb would be empty'.⁸ Indeed the Resurrection would have been meaningless without the Empty Tomb: to tell a first-century Pharisaic Jew that Christ was risen from the dead was to invite a party round to the graveyard to look for the body, and a recent listing of 45 eminent scholars – not all of them Christians – who assert the historicity of the Empty Tomb as 'straightforward fact' suggests that here, there is solid ground to stand on.⁹ But, says the Bishop, if the tomb was empty, the Apostles might have 'pinched' the body.¹⁰ We cannot be sure, and it does not matter anyway, for we still have our Easter faith, even if the Lord's body crumbled into dust or lies amouldering in the hills of Palestine.

It is of course unlikely that men guilty of such a fraud would have lived and died for it, but the Jenkins view also seems to me to combine sceptical rationalism and fideism in the oddest proportions, on the basis of a falsely 'scientific' view of history. The Bishop is quite right to assert that the Empty Tomb is not a 'proof' of the Resurrection *by itself*; but it is a 'proof' when taken in conjunction with what made sense of it, the apostolic experience of the Risen Lord. There may be people who claim to find the evidence of the Empty Tomb convincing by itself, but I think that they deceive themselves. What we find plausible as evidence in a given matter depends on what we believe already on other grounds, and a Marxist or a sceptic or indeed a modern Dean who dismisses the angelic appearances *a priori* is not going to find anything 'scientifically' convincing in any account which contains them. The disciples found the evidence of the Empty Tomb convincing because they already believed in a God who worked miracles, in a God who intervened in his creation. I found the evidences convincing because I was already a believer, on grounds both reasonable and non-rational, and therefore was open to the argument that the Empty Tomb stands both as a proof and as a sign of the Saviour's risen glory.

There is nothing unhistorical about such a view, precisely because there is no such thing as a pseudo-scientific view of evidence among historians on which they can all be at one – which is why, for example, Marxist and liberal historians differ so markedly from one another. Again, historians listen for the note of authenticity which some will find in the Gospels, and not others: the Magdalene's cry 'They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid Him' (John 20:2) either sounds something like true reported speech, or it does not: and that is an evidence not to the head but to the heart. For the question of what is 'authentic' in human affairs cannot be decided by miscalled 'scientific' tests. Indeed the confident scepticism about 'evidence' in some New Testament commentaries arises from the

naïve empiricism of the Liberal Protestantism which so dominates New Testament scholarship, a scholarship which fondly imagines that its findings about evidence are ones on which all men of ordinary good will can agree. The end-results, however, depend on the methods chosen to produce them.¹¹ These assured results of modern liberal biblical scholarship are nothing more than the assured first premisses on which Liberal Protestants agree, for their conclusions about evidence are the simple consequences of the premisses from which they derive them.¹²

I would also argue that a purely spiritual redemption makes a political theology like the Bishop's impossible, for if the body had no ultimate spiritual significance, if our redemption takes no account of our corporeal existence, then we had better confine Christianity to spiritual things and leave politics to politicians. Yet the doctrine of 'the objective and external bodily resurrection' has also been called the doctrine on which the *Church* stands or falls – *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae* – by one of Durham's greatest biblical scholars, Charles Cranfield,¹³ as also by Donald MacKinnon;¹⁴ and if the Church does stand or fall on that doctrine, then we must say, – no bodily resurrection, then no Christian Church, and no bishops either. Indeed the Bishop's views are not those of any living growing Church, from South American Pentecostalism to Polish Catholicism; rather, they are bound to remain confined to a small 'educated' Gnostic elite, one content with doubt amounting to denial.

But then, like God and revelation, the Bishop's views retain their mystery. Why does he swallow the great camel of the Word made flesh, and strain at the gnat of the rising from the tomb? Why does he affirm resurrection appearances, but not a resurrection body? Why does he reduce the mystery to a belief in Christ's risen spirit, from a belief in his whole redeemed humanity? Why, as Miss Ruth Etchells put it directly to him, in the recent Radio 4 programme, so far and no further?¹⁵ There is even more amiss than meets the eye. The Bishop's God is one who loves the body enough to assume it, but not enough to redeem it. The Bishop's God loves mankind enough to become a man, but not enough to raise the whole of our humanity to God. If the Bishop's concern is the analogical character of our language about God, then this was not an objection to a miraculous 'objective and external bodily resurrection' to Athanasius and Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, Calvin and Barth, Hooker and Newman, who understood this matter rather better than David Jenkins. The partially analogical language in the creed about the 'resurrection of the body', never made that credal clause less binding. We do not know if the truth will be more 'literal' than we now guess, but St. Paul assures us that the resurrection body will be *more* real, more wonderful than this one, as one star exceeds another in its glory (1 Cor. 15:40–41).¹⁶ I suspect, however, that the Bishop rejects *the* miracle because he rejects all miracles, and with it the Judaeo-Christian mystery

of a God, to use the Bishop's odd words, who *may* 'move physical objects', of a God who is active in creation. For what we see in the Resurrection is the unexpected, dramatic, miraculous transformation of a lost and defeated cause by an action from outside history, a sudden breaking in of joy, in which all our history was transfigured and transformed, with the world of matter and of flesh. In him, all our dualisms are resolved, for as the old Fathers said, the Christian spirit loves matter, and God did not abhor it, but redeemed it, in entering our space and time in great humility. Let us proclaim the mystery of faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen. Not in the spirit alone did my Lord redeem me; not in the spirit alone do I pray to live unto my Lord.

NOTES

- 1 This is a sermon delivered in Collingwood and Grey Colleges in the University of Durham on 29 November and 4 December 1984. I am grateful to the Rev. Robert Daborn for the invitations to preach it and to the Rev. Peter Forster for his assistance in its preparation.
- 2 This text had a special importance for Karl Barth in his critique of Bultmann. 'For unless Christ's resurrection was a resurrection of the body, we have no guarantee that it was the decisively acting subject Jesus himself, the man Jesus, who rose from the dead'. In short, no bodily resurrection, no Christianity: *Church Dogmatics*, III, ii, E. T., T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1960, p 448: cited R. G. Crawford, 'The Resurrection of Christ', *Theology* 75, 1972, p 171.
- 3 William Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, Gifford Lectures, 1932-4, Macmillan, London 1934, p 478. I owe this reference to Dr. Alan Suggate.
- 4 For it can be nothing less, even if it be much more.
- 5 This is the possible meaning of the Bishop's words on 'Credo', transmitted 29 April 1984: transcript from London Weekend Television.
- 6 Henry Chadwick, 'The Truths of the Creed', *The Tablet*, 238, 7 July 1984, p 643.
- 7 Hence, on the 'Credo' programme, his denial that the Resurrection was '“a” miracle': rather, he indicated that it is to be identified with a set of God-inspired experiences: of what, he is not clear, though they do not require the empty tomb.
- 8 H. E. W. Turner, *Historicity and the Gospels: A Sketch of Historical Method and Its Application to the Gospels*, Mowbray, London 1963, p 59: see also his *Jesus, Master and Lord: A Study in the Historical Truth of the Gospels*, Mowbray, London 1970, p 361.
- 9 William Lane Craig, 'The Empty Tomb of Jesus', in R. T. France and David Wenham, eds., *Gospel Perspectives*, II, JSOT Press, Sheffield 1981, p 194; a revised version of the article, 'The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus', has been published in *New Testament Studies* 31, 1985, pp 39-67.
- 10 Report on LBC (London) radio phone-in programme, *The Church Times*, 27 July 1984, p 1.

- 11 M. D. Hooker, 'On Using the Wrong Tool', *Theology* 75, 1972, pp 570–81; 'In His Own Image', in Morna Hooker and Colin Hickling, eds, *What about the New Testament? Essays in Honour of Christopher Evans*, SCM, London 1975, pp 28–44.
- 12 'The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well' (George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads*, Longmans, London 1909 (1963), p 49). Whether or not Tyrrell is right about Harnack, he is certainly right about the Liberal tendency to project its own meanings into its texts and then admire them.
- 13 Private letter to the author.
- 14 '... I insisted that Christians shared with Marxists an ultimate hostility to any form of idealism, using the term to indicate a view of spiritual activity as autonomous, as in fact creating its own objects: this because for the Christian the *locus stantis vel cadentis fidei* was the Father's raising of his Son from the "tomb on the third day", this to be understood as his Amen to the work of human salvation that the Son had achieved in human flesh and blood ...' Donald MacKinnon, *Explorations in Theology* 5, SCM, London 1979, p 24. MacKinnon goes on to describe (p 29) those who interpret the Resurrection as the 'sudden or gradual birth of the conviction that Jesus was alive' as belonging to a sort of theological 'Dads' Army'
- 15 'Poles Apart', Radio 4, 28 October 1984.
- 16 Cf C. S. Lewis, who reverses the analogy: 'May we not, by a reasonable analogy, suppose likewise that there is no experience of the spirit so transcendent and supernatural, no vision of Deity Himself so close and so far beyond all images and emotions, that to it also there cannot be an appropriate correspondence on the sensory level?' C. S. Lewis, *They Asked for a Paper: Papers and Addresses*, Geoffrey Bles, London 1962, pp 181–2.

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