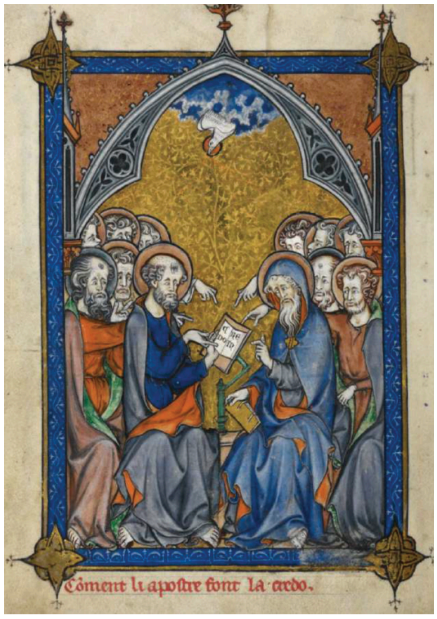
A Faith to Live By…

Sermons on the Apostles' Creed



5. "On the third day he rose from the dead…"

I'm not a huge soccer fan. But just occasionally something happens in the world of the beautiful game to make even me sit up and notice. And one such occasion was in March 2012, when the Bolton Wanderers midfield player Fabrice Muamba suffered a heart attack in the middle of a game against Tottenham Hotspur, and collapsed and died on the pitch at White Hart Lane. There was a cardiologist in the crowd, and he rushed onto the pitch, but could only confirm that the player's heart had indeed stopped, all attempts by paramedics on the pitch to get it to start again having come to nothing. The ambulance into which Muamba's body was stretchered took it to the London Chest Hospital, where they lowered its temperature to slow the rate of cell death which begins as soon as the heart stops pumping blood to the vital organs. And then, remarkably, a whole hour and 20 minutes after he had died, they managed to restart the heart, and – there's no other way of putting it – brought him back to life. Unsurprisingly, the press reached immediately for the theological dictionary to describe what had happened. It was, the headlines universally, pronounced, a miracle. And, for Muamba, and his family, friends, and Bolton Wanderers supporters the world over, no doubt that's exactly what it was.

Apparently, according to an item on the Today programme shortly afterwards, the state of the art technique used to reverse the dying process before it became irreversible (Muamba was technically 'dead' for 80 minutes, and any doctor could have signed a certificate to that effect with impunity) was being developed and made more widely available. That's surely a good thing, and most of us might hope that, were we to suffer an unexpected cardiac arrest, someone trained in the relevant procedures and a conveniently large fridge might happen

to be close at hand. But of course, for all the obvious benefits these sorts of medical breakthroughs might be acknowledged to have in the case of someone otherwise dying far too young, and leaving behind a young family as Fabrice Muamba would have, the reality is that they can only ever defer the inevitable. The deferral may well be a very welcome one; but it is only a deferral nonetheless. No one gets to cheat the tomb. Death gets us all in the end, no matter who we are, what we have achieved in life, or how unready we may feel. (And, no matter how much notice we are given of its inevitable approach, I suspect most people today still go to their deaths unprepared, having been endlessly distracted and discouraged from thinking about it by a popular culture and cosmetics industry which tries constantly to convince us that there's always going to be time to read those 1000 books, or watch those 1000 movies, or visit those 1000 tourist spots, before we die.) Medieval artists pictured death as a perpetually ravenous monster, devouring all and sundry—rich and poor, religious and irreligious, powerful and powerless, good, bad and indifferent—in its gory maw, and bringing every human life to an abrupt and unwelcome end. We might run from it, with all those anti-ageing creams, and rejuvenating tonics, and libido restoring tablets, that suddenly seem altogether less ridiculous as certain landmark birthdays come and go, and our bodies being increasingly to take on the aspect of an uncooperative partner determined to play irritating and sometimes embarrassing tricks on us; but we can't hide. Death, as they say, gets us all in the end.

That's why today's Easter message of the resurrection is so hard for us to hear, and, as our Gospel reading made clear enough, was hard for Jesus' disciples to hear too in the first instance. No one and nothing escapes death's clutches. Everything in our experience suggests otherwise. Even the green shoots breaking through the frost bitten soil, and the fluffy chickens and baby bunnies adopted by a culture surely more sentimental than serious in its search for symbols of 'new life', are in reality quite unfit for purpose. The plants that surge up to fill our borders in the spring wither and perish again before the year is out; while the fluffy chickens and baby bunnies left intact by the activities of foxes and other natural predators are rarely allowed to live full and healthy lives. Nature is precisely a cycle of life and death, and one in which, universal experience and scientific prediction alike bear eloquent witness, death – the eventual petering out of life in a whimper rather than a bang – seems bound to have the final say.

It is only in the teeth of this, staring it full in the face, and not by denying it, ignoring it or pretending that if we stick our head in the sand it won't happen, that Christian faith in the resurrection makes any sense at all. Because what faith discerns in the empty tomb of Jesus, and his awkward and improbable bodily appearances to the disciples in the 40 days after that first Easter, is precisely the *promise* of God himself, *interrupting* all that we know and can make sense of and can reasonably expect or hope for; and insisting that *despite* all this, the world's future and our own personal future with God is something we can and should look forward to and begin to anticipate and prepare for in the midst of our lives here and now. Because resurrection faith is hopeful rather than optimistic; and it is underwritten not by experience, or argument, or by a blind refusal to face reality and the otherwise irresistible approach of the grim reaper; but by the promise of the God who holds all life in his hands, who has set limits to the span of each human life, and who in Christ has taken our mortal and sinful nature upon himself and broken sin's hold upon it, delivering a death-blow to death itself, so pointing us decisively *beyond the bounds* of all reasonable expectation to a very different ending to the human story, to the world's story, to your story and to mine.

Now, the church has sometimes gotten its lingerie in a twist over the claim that God raised Jesus *bodily* from the dead. Some of you will remember the kerfuffle in the mid-1980s caused by David Jenkins, the much maligned but equally much misunderstood and misrepresented Bishop of Durham created a huge fuss (mostly generated by the media) and his observation that the resurrection of Jesus was no mere 'conjuring trick with bones'—an observation taken by many as a denial that the resurrection need ever have happened, and the suggestion that Christian faith might happily suppose that Jesus' bones were still lying somewhere in a Palestinian grave yard. That's not what he said, and almost certainly not what he meant, despite his lack of skill with the 'bon mot' or the media friendly sound-bite. What he meant, I think, is not very far removed from what the gospel writers seem equally concerned to convey when they tell us, for example, that, although Jesus' tomb was empty, he appeared to the disciples despite the fact that they had locked and barred the doors to the room they were meeting in. Or Paul, in his insistence in 1 Corinthians 15, that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God', and so of course the resurrection body will not just be the same old same old; it will be a 'spiritual body' – not a body without substance,

but a body belonging to a new material order, a new creation, called into being by God's Spirit. It will be familiar, like our current embodied existence in some ways, but very different in others. So, Jesus takes the trouble to show the disciples the scars in his hands and feet, and the spear mark that had pierced his side; and later on, he invites Thomas to put his fingers into the wounds if he wishes to do so. It's all very odd. But the suggestion of all this is absolutely consistent with the pattern of other resurrection appearances: the Jesus who returns to the disciples is no mere wraith or phantom or ghost, but in some sense a flesh and blood presence; yet his 'body' (for want of a better word) is equally clearly not the same *sort* of body as he had had before: it passes unimpeded through walls, materializes and dematerializes at will, and its appearance is such as to make it difficult at first even for the disciples themselves to recognize as the same Jesus whom they had loved and followed and seen put to death just a few days previously. The risen Lord still bears the scars of his life and suffering in this world; but he no longer belongs to this world, and his body is indeed, therefore, no mere product of a 'conjuring trick with bones', but the foretaste of a new creation which will not be less real, less physical than this one, but in some sense much *more* real, much more material, much more dense and abiding.

C. S. Lewis, in his allegorical book *The Great Divorce* pictures a group of souls who make the journey from purgatory to heaven to see whether they might not prefer to spend eternity there. And, getting out of the bus, the first thing these souls notice is that walking on the grass in heaven hurts their feet! Why? Because the reality of heaven, or the kingdom of God, or the new creation, is *more* real, *more* solid, *more* substantial than the reality of this world, and not less real. And it will take them time to get used to living in such a substantial world.

For some reason even Christians seem to find it easier to believe in a life beyond this one which will be populated by purely spiritual beings, drifting around in a world without taste or smell or touch or sound or colour or form – all things which depend on our bodies and our senses. But the Bible never encourages any such belief, or the tacit negativity towards the body that sometimes accompanies it. God *loves* the materiality of the world. He *loves* bodies. He *loves* the world of the senses. That's why he created them! And Christian hope for life together with God in eternity is not for a life *deprived* of all the sensuous and sensual

things we so enjoy in this life—the taste of fresh strawberries bursting on the tongue, the sound of a Church organ swelling so that the whole building shakes, the feeling of a cool breeze on a sultry afternoon, the smell of peat smoke on a chilly autumn evening (those are mine—you can supply your own!)—but a life which is best pictured in terms of the *very best* of our embodied existence, purged of whatever spoils it, *and so much more besides,* enjoyed now in God's presence. Christian hope is hope for resurrected and *renewed* bodies to dwell in the midst of a redeemed cosmos, and not the grey survival of disembodied spirits. So, when Jesus appears to the disciples in the garden, in the upper room, on the beach, he does so bearing the physical marks, as it were, of a whole new dimension of human existence, as well as the scars of the old; and he comes speaking words of God's peace—the peace which passes all understanding, and which in biblical understanding will be the hallmark of that new life in the new heaven and the new earth which God has promised to create.

Christian hope in the resurrection is hope not for a disembodied state robbed of teeth and tongue to taste the goodness of God's new creation; but for a life lived in God's presence equipped with all that it takes to enjoy the *good things* in life, and *so much more* besides. If that's not something to look forward to, I don't know what is.