

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

The Resurrection of the Dead

We are still very much in the season of Easter, and I want to say something about the resurrection of the dead. But I am going to approach this theme in a rather round-about way. Having been a Fellow of Queens' College for over fifty years I am a very long time next door neighbour of King's College here, and I hope you will forgive me if I begin with a story from my own college, a story about perhaps the most distinguished Dean of Queens' College there has been - the Cambridge Platonist, John Smith. His name is mentioned every year in our Commemoration of Benefactors: 'John Smith, Fellow and Dean, one of the most learned philosophers and divines of the seventeenth century'. John Smith died there in Queens', probably of consumption, at the early age of 34. His funeral oration was preached in Queens' old Chapel by Simon Patrick, then a Fellow of Queens', later our President, and later still Bishop of Ely. After a glowing tribute to Smith's piety and learning and his sweet nature that endeared him to tutorial pupils and colleagues alike, Patrick went on: 'There was always discernible in him a cheerful sense of God's goodness, which ceased not in the time of sickness. But we most longed to see the motions of his soul, when he drew near to the centre of his rest. He that had such a constant feeling of God within him, we might conclude could have the most strong and powerful sense when he came near to a close conjunction with him. But God was pleased to deny this to us, and by a lethargic distemper which seized his spirits, he passed the last six days of his life... in a kind of sleep, and without taking much note of anything he slept in the Lord.'

Notwithstanding this last rather down to earth and sardonic note, I'm sure you'll

agree that we are in quite a different world there - where Fellows of Queens' gathered round their colleague's deathbed to see if his sense of God would be especially manifest in the manner of his passing. I can't imagine today's Fellows of Queens' - still less today's Fellows of King's - gathering round a colleague's deathbed to see if his sense of God would be especially manifest in the manner of his passing.

The Cambridge Platonists were a remarkable group of philosophically minded divines who graced this University in the mid seventeenth century: Benjamin Whichcote (a former Provost of Kings'), Ralph Cudworth, Henry More and John Smith among others. They were Protestants. Smith, after all was Dean of Queens' during the Commonwealth, when our President and all the Fellows had been extruded and replaced by Parliament men. But the Cambridge Platonists were lovers of reason as well as lovers of God. Cudworth's magnum opus, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, reveals by its very title the nature of their enterprise - a wonderful reprisal of the Christian Platonism that had characterised the early centuries of the Church's life. John Smith published nothing in his short lifetime, but after his death his *Select Discourses*, along with Patrick's funerary oration, was published and became a classic of the movement, not least for his wonderful style. 'Smith is certainly an excellent writer' says an expert on the Cambridge Platonists, '...one of the very best in seventeenth century literature. His sentences undulate within a lovely pattern that constantly merges style and thought.' And he illustrates this with a quotation from Smith's *Discourse on the Immortality of the Soul*. Here's just one of those lovely undulating sentences: 'Those dismal apprehensions which pinion the Souls of men to mortality, churlishly check and starve that noble life thereof, which would always be rising upwards and

spread itself in a free heaven: and when once the Soul hath shaken off these, when it is once able to look through a grave and see beyond death, it finds a vast Immensity of Being opening itself more and more before it, and the ineffable light and beauty thereof shining more and more unto it; when it can rest and bear itself upon an Immaterial centre of Immortality within, it will then find itself able to bear itself away by a self-reflexion into the contemplation of an Eternal Deity.'

It is this Discourse on the Immortality of the Soul that I want to consider now in conjunction with St Paul's speculations on the resurrection of the body which we read about in 1 Corinthians 15.

But before I do that, let's just return once more to Simon Patrick's closing words in that funeral address before Smith's body was laid to rest in the vault below Queens' old Chapel, now our library: 'he is flown away, his soul has got loose, and now feels her wings... he has changed his habitation, he is gone into the other world... He hath left his body behind him awhile to take a sleep in the dust, and when it awakes at the Resurrection, it shall follow to the same place. Then shall it be made a spiritual body, then shall it have wings given to it also and be lovingly married again to the soul, never more to suffer any separation'.

Intriguingly, Simon Patrick combines here something like Smith's own basically Platonic view of the soul's inherent immortality - being an incorporeal and unitary substance it cannot decompose and perish like the body - with something like St Paul's view of the resurrection of the body - its transformation into a spiritual incorruptible resurrection body, like that of Christ - body and soul apparently destined to be reunited at the Day of Judgement in the end.

The Church's teaching about the last things and the final consummation of God's whole creative plan has inevitably been the most speculative area of Christian doctrine. It has often been pointed out how different is the biblical teaching about the resurrection of the body from Greek philosophical arguments for the immortality of the soul. The latter are derived from anthropological reflection on the nature of the human spirit, the former from theological reflection on God's nature and promise and on what God has already done in raising Jesus from the dead. But in fact you cannot separate the two ideas completely. After all St Paul says we shall all be changed, and he cannot mean just the physical body. Each of us is a living subject of experience and thought, not just an animal organism, and the Fathers of the Church found it necessary to complement the Bible's talk of resurrection with some more philosophical notions of the soul's immortality. And then John Smith himself does not only use philosophical arguments for immortality. He too is quite clear that Christian hope is as much grounded in confidence that God will not forsake his own as in arguments for the soul's immortality.

Now of course both St Paul and John Smith come from pre-scientific ages, and we cannot just take over what either of them says without further reflection in the light of modern knowledge. In a scientific age we are bound I think to distrust those old philosophical arguments about the soul's inherent immortality. To that extent we stand closer to St Paul. Belief in the life of the world to come is not based on philosophical or anthropological study. For us, as for St Paul, it is wholly bound up with belief in God, in God's love that will not let us go, and in God's power to remake the dead in a new creation, a spiritual realm beyond all change and decay. But I doubt if we can share St Paul's conviction that it is this physical,

mortal, perishable body that will be changed into a spiritual, immortal, imperishable body. Our greater knowledge of the physical organism that is born and grows, exchanging all its particles every seven years, we are told, and eventually dies and perishes or is burned, belies the suggestion that it is raised again. The new creation, rather, must be genuinely new - a fresh creative act of God by which we are re-made for eternity. In fact St Paul himself, in a verse that seems to contradict what has gone before, has an inkling of the need for a radically new creation. 'I tell you this, brethren, flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.' But if the resurrection is a new creation, what carries the continuity from this life to the next, so that it is indeed we who are remade, and not just a replica in a new mode? Well surely it must be something like the soul of which John Smith speaks, the subject of our life and personal history that already transcends its material base, and is then given a new form in the world to come. I cannot agree with Smith's arguments for an inherent immortality of the human soul, but I do see in human self-consciousness and the ethical and aesthetic values manifested already in our culture and our life together intimations of immortality - to quote the title of Wordsworth's poem - and hints of the revealed truth that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has made us for himself - our hearts being restless till we find our rest in him, as St Augustine said - will indeed not let us go but take us through death into his own eternal life.

Finally what are we to make of the time interval before the end? I guess St Paul would be amazed to know that we are reflecting on his words nearly two thousand years after his time, and I think we can sit pretty lightly to his talk of us being changed in the twinkling of an eye at the last trump, just as we can to Simon

Patrick's talk of Smith's body sleeping awhile - rather a long while - beneath Queens' old Chapel - or for that matter to the idea that souls sleep in the Lord - or in Abraham's bosom - till judgement day. According to St Luke, Jesus said to the penitent criminal crucified with him, 'Today, you will be with me in Paradise', and while I doubt if many folk are ready for an immediate transition to the life of heaven at their death, I imagine the process of transition starts at once, and that Smith and Patrick were more right to think of the soul being taken into God's new creation straight away. It may need a gradual process of purgation, and certainly the new creation is being built up gradually out of successive generations formed here on Earth. So I am inclined to think of that new creation as the resurrection world already being fashioned out of all those who have gone before, and I do not envisage an ever-extended temporal interval until a single resurrection at the last day. These details, of course, are not revealed to us and we can but speculate a little, as St Paul and John Smith and Simon Patrick did in their different ways. But we who believe, as they did, in the love and power of God, already manifest in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead that we were celebrating last Sunday on Easter Day, can still have confidence and faith that God will not let us go, but will take us into his new creation beyond death, where, as Julian of Norwich said, all will be well, all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well.

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