

10. The resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting

Series: I Believe - The Apostle's Creed

Date: 11 December 2022, 3rd Sunday in Advent

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Revelation 21:1-6, 22-22:6; John 11:17-44

Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.'

What do you hope for?

Advent is a season of hope and anticipation. The year is winding down. We're looking forward to Christmas and after that holidays. We hope for all sorts of things in life - a holiday, a new car, a better job, a relationship healed, a loved one to return, a debt paid. What do you hope for? Asking someone what they hope for is a great way to get to know them on a deeper level, as what we hope for reveals something of our heart. Western society used to hope for the kingdom of God, but we gave that up some time ago. Then we hoped for nation and empire. Our belief in the nation, at least as an object of hope for the future, is wobbly. Now, in late modern capitalist societies, it seems our hopes have shrunk to the self and the fulfilment of our desires. So yes, some of us long for grand ideas of justice and equality. We hope against hope that we can cut our emission and halt climate change. But few of us are willing to make the sacrifices that these things require when our immediate desires can so easily be met. Despite being the most prosperous society that has ever been, we face an epidemic of hopelessness, if the rates of mental illness and suicide are anything to go by. It is because our hope has to be bigger than the fulfilment of our immediate desires. The hope we need has to be personal and at the same time global and everything in between.

This is our final sermon on the Apostles Creed. The creed summarises the Christian faith. It's a window through which we see the Bible's answers to the big questions we ask as human beings - Who is God? What is real? Who are we? What is wrong with the world? What is the solution? What can we hope for? To believe is to take your stand upon something from which you will face the world. The creed is an invitation for us to take our stand upon the God who made us and loves us and who has revealed himself in the person of his Son, whose birth as one of us we celebrate at Christmas. I hope the series has helped you get more of a handle on what we believe as Christians and the difference that makes to every aspect of life.

Today we come to the final lines of the creed - I believe in ... the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. These lines answer that big question, what can we hope for? The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting are a window into the glorious and cosmic future that God has promised for this world and for those who love him. It is with our eyes fixed on the horizon of God's future and not ourselves that we will find a hope that transforms our lives and enables us to persevere through all that life throws at us. And if you're not a believer I want you to consider what you have fixed your hope on, and whether it can sustain you like this hope. So let's have a look at those 2 lines.

The resurrection of the body

The creed mentions 2 resurrections - Jesus' own resurrection on the third day, and here at the end, the resurrection of the body. What is the difference? The resurrection of the body is one of those few bits of the creed that has entered into popular English-speaking consciousness in what we know as a nursery rhyme,

Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones
 Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones
 Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones
 Now hear the word of the Lord

The song began life as an African American spiritual and is taken from our Old Testament reading, Ezekiel 37. If you ever wanted to show someone that the Bible is not boring, get them to read Ezekiel. It's full of the most arresting visions. Here in chapter 37 Ezekiel pictures a valley full of dry bones. God commands him to prophesy to them:

7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. **8** I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

And then, as the breath of God comes into them,
 they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.

It's a vivid picture of the resurrection of the body - scattered bones, coming together, being clothed in flesh, and coming back to life. But as we read on we discover that it's an extended metaphor for Israel's return from exile.

11 Then he said to me: 'Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off." **12** Therefore prophesy and say to them: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel.

But what was a metaphor became a literal expectation in Jewish faith. That at the end of history God would raise all people from the dead and that all would be judged. We saw that in our reading from John 5 last week. And you can see it in Martha's response to Jesus in John 11.

23 Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.'

24 Martha answered, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.'

Jesus' response to Martha takes things far beyond the Jewish belief of the Old Testament.

25 Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; **26** and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?'

How is it that Jesus can make such an extraordinary claim? Back in chapter 5 he said,

21 For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.

And, again in verse 26

26 For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. Jesus can say he is the resurrection and the life because he shares in the being of the Father. He is the eternal Son of God, come as one of us, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. He is the source of life, the one in whom all things exist. The resurrection is in him because, as we saw a few weeks ago, he has entered the nothingness of death itself and filled it to overflowing with his own life.

But what is the connection between Jesus' own resurrection and the resurrection of the dead? Paul spells this out in 1 Corinthians 15.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. **21** For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. **22** For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. **23** But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

Christmas is cherry season. My uncle was a fruit wholesaler, and so it was always a treat to visit them for Christmas and enjoy the cherries. Growing up in Sydney, I always remember that the first box of cherries of the season was auctioned for charity. Those cherries told you two things. That the rest of the cherries were coming. And what the cherries would be like that season. If the cherries of that first box were big and juicy, you knew it would be a good cherry season.

This is the picture that Paul is using here. Jesus' resurrection is the first fruits of the general resurrection of the dead. His resurrection is the guarantee that the general resurrection will happen. It's as certain as Jesus' own resurrection. This is why the resurrection of Jesus is the lynchpin of the Christian faith. Back in verse 14 Paul writes,

if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

Without Jesus' resurrection, we have nothing to hope for. But with it we have everything to hope for. And second, Jesus' resurrection is the foretaste of what the resurrection of the body will look like. This is what Paul outlines in the rest of 1 Corinthians 15. He sums this up in Philippians 3.21 saying that Christ will, "transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."

I'll never forget standing by the grave of my friend's son, not yet 2, weeping as they lowered his little casket in. The boy's grandfather, my old minister, said the committal with a strength that was all of grace.

Forasmuch as it has pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed: we therefore commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

That is our hope, even through tears. That death is not the end. That the body of our humiliation will be raised to be like Christ's glorious body. And I have to say, I do not know how you can face death without this hope.

Just as an aside, notice the incredible affirmation of bodily existence that is in the creed. In Jesus, God has united himself to bodily life, and he remains incarnate as the risen and reigning Christ. Christ's bodily resurrection as the firstfruits leads us to the second point, the life everlasting.

The life everlasting

The creed speaks of the life everlasting. In Isaiah, 2 Peter and Revelation we read of the new heavens and the new earth. While texts like these give a sense of the radical difference of the future that God will bring, texts like Romans 8 speak more of continuity between the old and the new creation. Jesus' own resurrection is the key. His resurrected body is the first bit of the new creation. It is recognisably still Jesus. There is continuity with what came before. But it is radically different. He himself is the pattern of the new creation, the first fruits. It will be embodied existence for eternity.

This of course is beyond our comprehension. The Bible speaks in pictures to help us grasp the wonder and glory of God's future. And so we read in Revelation 21 and 22 of a new heaven and a new earth, a new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. Here there is an end of suffering, put in the most tender and intimate of terms.

“[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’

The resurrection of the dead is of course the end of death, because she has no power, no longer is anyone in her possession.

There is the removal of all that is wrong with this world, all that is evil, all that would destroy God's good creation. Isaiah puts it like this, “They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain.”¹ No longer is there any curse. One of our kids Bible's puts it like this, everything sad will come untrue.

God will give the water of life. We will be eternally satisfied.

*To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.*²

Verse 22 suggests that all that is good in this world, all the glory of human creativity will be there, purged of corruption.

The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it.

And of course at the centre of it all is the throne of God and of the Lamb. And there are those beautiful pictures. There is no need for a lamp or even the sun, because the Lord God will give all who dwell in the city light. Nor is there any need for a temple, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple. God will dwell with his people. They will be his people, and he will be with them and will

¹ Isaiah 65.25

² Revelation 21.6

be their God. And, for me, the summit of this picture, “they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”³

Isn't that the very deepest longing of our hearts? To be in God's presence, to have him wipe away our tears, to see him face to face? That is our hope. That is the life everlasting. Life in God, from God, with God, before God, in all his infinite, love and light and power.

Last week we hosted a terrific talk from astronomer Jordan Collier. At the end of his talk he zoomed out from St George's to the earth, our solar system, our galaxy, our galaxy cluster through to the edge of the known universe. I have to say that at that point my mind was dissolving in the vastness. Our hope is that we will see face to face the one who made all this. Some people think what we hope for as Christians is boring. And I have to say if your vision of God's future is sitting around on harps in clouds, then yes. But that is not the Biblical vision. I imagine that we will have an eternity to explore the infinite God, and the vastness of the universe that he has made.

Jesus says, *'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?'*

Do you? This is our hope. It's why we believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. May you and I persevere in this hope. May you and I be ready to give a reason for this hope to all who ask us, that they too may find life and hope in Jesus name.

Bibliography

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³ Revelation 21.3, 22.4-5