

16 April 2023 - Views from the Pews: On the resurrection of the faithful

Every Sunday we stand and declare before God that we all believe in ‘the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting’. How exactly do we understand these ancient and enormously significant words? Like the new converts quizzing Paul (1 Cor 15:35), we still want to know ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’

All physical bodies – plant, animal and human – are temporary assemblages of material elements, held together as working communities of cells by the buzzing energy that powers our material lives. Most of our body cells are replaced every seven years or so, which means that the body you inhabit today is not the same as the one you inhabited a decade ago. But eventually the energy needed to do that runs out, and then our personal assemblage of material elements simply dissociates. Its components are returned to earth, to be incorporated back into the circle of life, including into other bodies. As God reminded Adam, ‘dust you are, and to dust you will return’. The idea of reassembling all these scattered elements into a new version of our old bodies makes no ordinary sense. Only Jesus’ flesh escaped corruption (Acts 2:31).

The biblical concept of personal identity saw body and soul as a single indivisible unit. Body and soul lived and died together – that was indeed the true horror of physical death, so feared by the ancients. Our only human consolation is that there is a sense in which no-one who has loved and been loved is entirely lost, because they live on in the memories of those who loved them.

Annual war memorials are attended by generations of people with no personal memories of the names inscribed, but God’s memory of them is eternal. So everyone loved and remembered by God – that is *everyone!* – lives on in God’s memory. For us, there is no need for any impossible connection with our scattered material remains. We know we can write a document on one computer, save it to an external memory, and retrieve and recreate it on a new computer. So we can trust that God will remember us as we are now, and at some point in eternity will recreate that memory into a new body. As C S Lewis says, we will still be recognisably ourselves, but full-grown as ‘sons of God, ageless, radiant, wise, beautiful and drenched with joy’.