

## Reflection for Sunday 18 April

In the 1920's, the artist Stanley Spencer imagined the resurrection in his local churchyard at Cookham, on the Thames in Berkshire. It's an extraordinary image of the daffodils being lifted, as the graves open and people of all shapes and sizes, in shrouds, Sunday best suits and not much at all, emerge from the earth, as if after a long sleep. Spencer included his friends and neighbours, even himself and his wife. He imagines a kind of holy suburb of heaven.

Amazing as the painting is, I can't imagine the resurrection in Slaley or Riding Mill in quite the same way. Nor, I must confess, do I warm to the idea that so many people seem to find so comforting, that our deceased relatives are 'up there' watching down on our every movement. Maybe I don't have enough Latin blood in me. The idea of an eternity largely given over to people-watching, even one of watching one's much-missed nearest and dearest, just doesn't appeal - unless the celestial street café serves exceptionally good espresso.

So what do we really mean when we say, as we do in the Creed, 'I believe in the resurrection of the body?'

No-one's thoughts and feelings were more centred on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ than St Paul, but he is the first to caution against too literal and limited an understanding of what resurrection means for us. Paul does not mince words. In his first Letter to the Corinthians, he puts it like this:

*But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body ... It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.*

It's one of the readings suggested for funerals, but I rarely have the courage to use it. Paul's bluntness seems almost brutal; but he makes a strong point, one that we need to reflect upon perhaps more often than we do - and take to heart. Where Paul's teaching and today's Gospel from St Luke come together is on the significance of bodies.

Jesus, in his second appearance to his disciples causes deep consternation. At first, the disciples are, perhaps quite understandably, terrified, despite the report of his appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They don't recognise him and think they're seeing a ghost. But then Jesus invites them to touch him; and to prove that he's no ghost, he promptly downs a nice piece of grilled fish.

The next passage is fascinating because just as in the Emmaus story, the full truth of Jesus's resurrection only becomes clearer when he 'opens their minds to understand the scriptures'. And yet the exact nature of Jesus's risen body remains something of a mystery. It may be a body, we can touch and feel, but in line with St Paul's teaching, it's not quite as we've known before. For example, Jesus can just suddenly appear and vanish. Be that as it may, the bodily reality of the risen Jesus, emphasised so strongly here, has abiding and profound implications for us all.

It tells us that bodies matter deeply. They are a totally integral part of who and what we are. Of course, this is a complex matter. Those whose bodies don't work properly, are disfigured, or which have become frail and painful may feel that to be embodied is not without its challenges. Such considerations, of course, underly the continuing debate about euthanasia; but if we insist that the evidence of the resurrection of the body is important, the clear consequence of this is that we too need to care for bodies – our bodies and those of our neighbours.

This means that as a key and central part of our mission, as those who trust in the power of the risen Lord Jesus, we must work for healing in every way possible (just as he did in his earthly ministry). Healthcare and the right conditions for human flourishing, justice, fairness, especially in combatting food poverty and poor housing are not optional extras that we can turn our attention too only once we've attended to people's spiritual needs. In fact, to pretend or to attempt to attend to people's spiritual needs without also caring for their physical needs would be a gross and grotesque distortion of the gospel.

It also means that if having bodies is part of the new creation – God's deepest plan and wish for creation - then we surely have to have a concern for physical nature of the whole of creation. The new heaven and new earth are not just some kind of spiritual realm, but are earthed (literally) in the potential ever-goodness of creation.

This is why we Christians must care for our planet and its well-being. It's a direct and inescapable result of our belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ – and not just because we believe that God created the heavens and the earth. Indeed, this is the distinctively *Christian* reason why we must be at the forefront of the green, environmental and ecological debates; and to be seen to be leading the way in finding a sustainable future for our world, not only by our words, but by our actions.

And, let us pray, that as we continue to study the scriptures, our minds too will be opened to understand that the forgiveness of sins proclaimed in Jesus's name to all nations - and the hope and transformation bound up in that - gets right under the skin of our ordinary, earthly, bodily lives.