

Ballyvaloo

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Welcome

Faith and faith in life after death are very closely connected in our convictions. It can be a surprise, therefore, to realise that for most of the Old Testament, ancient Israelites believed in God for now only. Yet, by the time of Jesus, belief in the resurrection was widely shared. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection, so did John the Baptist as did the Dead Sea Scroll community. Likewise, Paul before his encounter with Christ believed in the resurrection.

Topic

How that rapid evolution took place is a story worth telling.

Steps

The book of Daniel teaches the resurrection. At the time of writing there was a newish empire in the Middle East, the Seleucid Empire, stretching from Syria to India, including parts of modern Afghanistan. One ruler, with the marvellous name of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, began a persecution of the Jews in his empire, as recorded in 1 and 2 Maccabees. Until then, Jews had believed God would be faithful to good people before they died, in this life, because there was no afterlife. Stories like the killing of the mother's seven sons, forced the question: when could God be faithful to those who were faithful to him to the point of death? In that context, they expanded their religious imagination to include resurrection. NB: the issue was how would God be faithful and just. So, God would show himself faithful by raising the dead at the end of time.

You will notice how the word faithful has come up again. Once St Paul encountered the risen Christ, he saw that the faithfulness of God has acted in raising Jesus from the dead. He went a significant step further. The cross is also a disclosure of God's faithfulness, this time, to broken humanity, as a gesture of compassionate solidarity. Paul says as much in Romans 3:21-26, where in part we read:

God publicly displayed him at his death as the mercy seat accessible through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed. This was also to demonstrate his righteousness in the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who lives because of Jesus' faithfulness. (Romans 3:25-26 NET)

Paul journey was in reverse: God's faithfulness was evident first of all in Jesus' resurrection and then in the light of the resurrection on the cross. That is why at the start of Galatians, Paul mentions the resurrection first and only then the cross.

Faithfulness is a powerful word. In Exodus 24, God present himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, with these words:

The LORD passed by before him and proclaimed: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in loyal love and faithfulness." (Exodus 34:6 NET)

So, compassion, grace, steadfast love and faithfulness are the qualities of the God of the covenant. This is the God we believe in, a God who is faithful to us now and whose faithfulness will see us across the bar of death.

Imagination is important, to us and to St Paul. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul explores what the risen body might be like. He uses various images: plants and animals, even stars and heavenly bodies. En route, he invents a new term for a new reality beyond our experience: the spiritual body. He means, in God will be ourselves, with our identity and history and relationships – all that the body means to us – but somehow all utterly transformed. A useful image is the child in the womb. The next stage of life is inevitable and, for the child in the womb, unimaginable. Still it is real and a totally new way of being.

How can we be convinced of this? Well, we do believe in Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of all who have fallen asleep. But there is another path. In Romans 5:1-5, Paul takes up again the transformative power of suffering:

Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:3-5 NET)

The experience of the Spirit is the key, an experience we know in prayer and in loving service. As Paul says, in his great chapter 8 of Romans,

Moreover if the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will also make your mortal bodies alive through his Spirit who lives in you. (Romans 8:11 NET)

The present experience of the Spirit is the ground of our hope in our own resurrection in Christ. The resurrection is a matter of faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love.

Conclusion

We have come a long way from the Seleucid Empire! We know from frequent experience that death is an end, the person we knew and loved ceases to be. Our faith that the end is not, in fact, the end is not based on a vague optimism or wishy washy wishful thinking. The first foundation is an event: Christ is risen, the first fruits of all who have fallen asleep. As a hymn put it, he is risen, we are risen. The second foundation is in heart of each one of us: hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Spirit given to us.