

The Assumption 2020

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Christianity is a religion of the body. This idea sits awkwardly with what many people think about religious faith and the spiritual aspect of our lives. It is all too easy to think of belief in God, in an afterlife, in the language of soul and spirit and heaven, as if all these were intended to divorce us from our earthly lives, to take us away from the reality of our material existence. There is no doubt that there have been and are approaches to the spiritual which do offer just such an escape, but none of the world's great faith traditions can properly be recognised as such.

This is especially true of the Christian church. Indeed, I suspect that one of the reasons why our churches generally have been so thrown by the crisis of the pandemic is that Christian insistence that virtual reality is not quite enough, that being present to God and to one another bodily is the basis of what it means

to be the church. After all, the church is the body of Christ, that is to say, it is the earthly expression of the incarnate love of God. This truth is never more clearly manifest than in this sacrament of the eucharist, where the physical reality of earthly bread becomes nothing less than the glorified body of the one who gives himself in death for the life of the world. The physical body of Jesus of Nazareth, beaten, broken, crucified, is the source of any Christian life, and we celebrate that life with our bodies as much as anything else – we do the physical things we call sacraments to and with our bodies to affirm our identity as those who our joined to the one body in the person of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps it is because we, as a society, are not generally comfortable with our bodies, that we fail as Christians to remember how central to our faith is the fact of bodily life. In a world which oppresses us with concepts of perfection – beauty, or fitness, or health, or weight – our bodies become the scapegoat of our own fears and insecurities, instead of the treasure of life which God has given to us. This is hardly surprising, given the

content of the visual culture in which we currently live. But though unsurprising, it should not be unchallenged, for the exploitation of human beings by one another is almost always a bodily activity, and its consequences are seen in every tragic aspect of human life – from the body of a refugee washed up on a beach, to the body of a young man suicidal because of homophobic prejudice.

In this climate of exploitation, no-one suffers more than young women. In Christian history, only relatively recently have we abandoned the idea that a young woman's body belonged to someone else – her father, or her husband. Whilst we have evolved out of this literal chatteldom, we've replaced it with the tyranny of air brushed flawlessness to which no-one should have to aspire, whilst at the same time passing over the horrors of sexual violence and exploitation as if they are simply part of growing up.

This feast of the Assumption, however, tells us something different. This feast of the Assumption is a celebration of the body. And its focus is not just any

body, but the body of a young woman. What we are celebrating today is the Christian promise of redemption, and – far from a stress upon immaterial life – the assumption of Our Lady teaches us that what it means to be redeemed is something which is true of our whole selves, of the physical mess of our bodies as well as the metaphysical mystery of our souls. The soul, remember, is the form of the body, as Thomas Aquinas puts it: that means, the soul is that which makes me, me. But if I do not have a body, there is no me to be identified. A human person is a whole person, not some immaterial spiritual reality divorced from the discomfort of food and drink and blood and guts and pain and sex and death. By his incarnation, by his assumption of human nature, body and soul, Christ transforms that human nature so that everything about me, all that I am as a person, is welcomed into the hope which we call heaven, the hope of redemption anticipated in the girl who is also the Mother of God.

That girl is the one whose lowliness is exalted by God. “From henceforth, all generations shall call me blessed.

For he that is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” The text we call the Magnificat, that marvellous Lukan riff on the Song of Hannah from the first book of Samuel, is the foundational Christian declaration of the mighty acts of God, the bizarre inversion of everything the world expects to be true. It tells us not simply of God’s dealings with the powerful and poor as general concepts, but of his dealings with real, individual, physical human beings. Luke puts those magnificent words into the mouth of a young Galilean peasant girl, a girl perhaps of fourteen or fifteen years, and he does this because he knows that in her God has done the most extraordinary thing of all: he has entrusted his son, the very salvation of the world, to a humble and insignificant teenager, to the reality of human childbirth, to the awkward and uncomfortable physicality of human beings with human bodies.

It is that act of salvation, of God’s choosing to become human in the womb of a teenage girl, which creates the promise of redemption and resurrection which we

celebrate today. The new life of Easter, the risen life of Christian redemption, the life which we call heaven, is the gift of God to his people. It does not sit happily with the sanitised purity of our contemporary ethereal spirituality. It refuses to be contained in the sealed up life of occasional piety which pops out its head on a Sunday and obediently climbs back into its box. The Assumption is a challenge to our assumptions about what we think goodness, happiness, holiness might be like. There are few more ridiculous notions than the idea that the fate and the hope of all of human existence might be entrusted to a peasant in the world of the powerful, to a slave in the world of emperors, to a girl in the world of men. But the God whose love turns the world upside down is the God who turns our doubt and our mistrust inside out by raising humanity to life with him.

So as we celebrate today the Christian doctrine of resurrection, we rejoice that to be a human being is to be a wonderful mess of physicality. Heaven does not consist in a persistence of watered down humanity, but

in the communion of saints, in the fellowship of whole human persons with the persons we call Father, Son and Holy Spirit. By the incarnation of Christ all the aspects of ourselves that we would rather insulate from God are instead united in the worship of heaven, for with God, nothing will be impossible.