

“What happens to me when I die?” or more pointedly, “What has happened to my loved ones who have died?” These are perhaps the most tormenting questions which ever face us. It has disturbed Christians from the first days of Christianity and continues to trouble Christians today.

The idea of some form of existence after death was not a novel idea in the ancient world before Christianity. But the form of after-life was a non-personal, non-existence as a shadow form in Sheol, the Underworld. This was not to be desired but was the inevitable fate of all who were not made into gods. Greek philosophy developed the idea of the on-going existence of the soul, released from the body which entered a better form of existence. So Socrates could go to his enforced demise content that he was escaping to a better world.

In Israel the martyrdoms endured under the persecution of the Syrian despot Antiochus IV made people speculate that this life could not be all that is if it could end finally when the righteous died in obedience to the laws of God. There had to be some reward and if not in this life then there must be a life to come.

By the time of Jesus the Pharisees at least believed in a general resurrection from the dead for the righteous of God when this world came to an end.

The resurrection of one man in anticipation of that general resurrection was a completely new idea. It came about because one man did return from the dead and appeared to people who had known him. The resurrected Jesus was in some ways different from the Jesus who had walked the roads of Palestine but was also recognisable as Jesus of Nazareth. His appearances transformed his disciples, and Paul, and the world.

In today's second reading we have a passage which dates from a few years only after the events it describes. It is the earliest written statement of Jesus appearing after death.

Paul is reminding the people of his beloved but so difficult Christian community at Corinth what he has previously taught them. It is a teaching which he did not create but which was given to him soon after his transformation from persecutor of Christians to proclaimer of Christ. Paul encountered Christ on the Damascus Road about three years after the Resurrection and presumably heard this formula of faith not long afterwards as he learnt about the faith he now embraced.

The basic teaching has a rhythm to it which suggests it might have been used in the liturgy or as a teaching/learning mantra: Jesus died and was buried / was raised and appeared to Cephas.

However this formula-of-faith began its life, it was developed by the communities of faith and perhaps by Paul himself to fill out resurrection belief.

What is significant is, first of all, that it is ancient. It goes back to the earliest days of the Christians in Jerusalem; and, secondly, it names witnesses. Peter and the twelve; more than five hundred of the brothers, James and the apostles. Here are witnesses who are alive and can be spoken to. Peter had in all likelihood passed through Corinth already; and there are five hundred others, some of them still alive, who can therefore be spoken to and verify the fact that they saw Jesus alive after his death.

What might be thought curious about this statement is that there is no mention of Mary Magdalene who, in the Gospel record, is the first witness of the Resurrection. This may be because as a woman her testimony had no standing in a court of law; it might be as a consequence of Paul's alleged, but unproven, misogyny, but it is a curious omission. It may be that the list Paul gives is linked to a commissioning in the Church, and Mary held no such role, as a woman.

Paul's re-statement of an ancient formula does not suggest that the appearances were visions but were clear sightings of a tangible object. This was something that he knew had happened, and an experience which he had, in some way shared. It has changed his life from a righteous and zealous defender of the Law of God given to Moses, to a proclaimer of the new Way, revealed by Christ. In a similar way the Resurrection-experience changed the lives of Peter and the other disciples and the early community who went out to the whole world, at immense personal risk, to proclaim the Good News they had experienced in the Resurrection, though they had cowed in fear at the crucifixion.

For a millennium and a half the Resurrection convinced the world. Only at the Enlightenment did a scientific world-view begin to prevail which now convinces people that the Resurrection is a myth, a fiction, an unreasonable proposition. As belief in God has diminished so accordingly has belief in there being anything beyond this world. Most people assume that death brings closure, finality, the end.

Scientists have not answered the most searching questions which follow to the fundamental question: why is there something rather than nothing? We know there is something; and we know there are such things as love, and altruism, and self-giving which defy scientific analysis. But why there is stuff, and moral-stuff, neither science nor philosophy can explain.

What explains it is a loving creator, whose love extends beyond the number of the too-many-to-be -counted stars; yet whose love holds in being every single creature this loving God has made, and who maintains us in love, beyond our brief span of time in this world in another dimension suffused with love. That is what we mean by Resurrection-Talk.

That was the reality glimpsed by the prophet Isaiah in his mystical experience of the presence of God in the Temple. That is the truth partially grasped by Peter in the boat. Both knew their smallness, their finitude in the presence of the Lord; but each glimpsed also the wonder of love which is our God.

“What happens to me when I die?” or more pointedly, “What has happened to my loved one who has died?” These are perhaps the most tormenting questions which ever faces us. And the answer lies in the unfathomable love of God who does not withdraw his gifts. God gives life, and does not take it back. Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, and where he has gone we will follow.