

GOSPEL SEEDS

NOVEMBER, 2005

Biblical reflections to encourage us in the work of evangelisation

WHAT ON EARTH MATTERS IN HEAVEN?

I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever hunger; no one who believes in me will ever thirst. ... Now the will of him who sent me is that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but that I should raise it up on the last day. It is my Father's will that whosoever sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and that I shall raise that person up on the last day. ... I am the living bread which has come down from Heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world. ... Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise that person up on the last day. For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink. (Jn 6: vv 35, 39, 40, 51, 54,55. Do read the whole discourse!)

Does matter really matter in Heaven?

November is a month that is given over liturgically to the “Last things”. Our minds turn to Heaven. Typically this means we turn from the concrete material world to an abstract ephemeral spiritual one up there somewhere. We tend to contrast the two and even to see them as opposites. Our bodies are seen to belong down here and our souls up there. This can even become a form of dualism (at least an implicit but often tenacious influential one). Thus, our good spiritual soul escapes from this bad material body and world to Heaven. More neutrally viewed, the world has not got much to do with God and neither do our bodies. Matter does not matter – not much anyway! Wrong! It matters to God. The Incarnation proves this. God took on human flesh so that human flesh could take on divinity. The resurrection of our bodies will happen – as these lines from John 6 declare. Yet we still struggle to take this seriously. I suspect we think resurrected bodies are just an afterthought on God's part. What purpose do they have? Perhaps our resurrected bodies are just intended as ballast to stop our souls floating away in Heaven or a tracking device lest they become too invisible! A place or role for the rest of creation barely crosses our minds! Yet God has promised a New Heavens and a New Earth (Rev 21-22)! Our tendency to over-spiritualisation and even dualism is dangerous. It is part of a sacred – secular divide that runs deep in our outlook as well as in society. It effects our attitudes to our bodily reality here and how we view, treat and use the created world. It effects what we think the Good News is and what we proclaim to others – many of whom place higher value and concern on the material reality.

The Temple and the Cosmos and their fulfilment in Christ

The Sacred - secular divide was not part of the Jewish mindset and outlook. The temple was at the centre of Jewish religion. The Jews did not practice religion and go to the temple to escape from the “secular” world. Quite the opposite! For them the temple was the whole cosmos – not just the earth - in miniature; it summed it up, representing it (e.g. Ps 93). God dwelt in the temple and God dwelt in all the world; his glory was there and his glory would fill the whole earth; people worshipped God there and all creation gives praise to God and serves his will. There are thus profound connections between religion, liturgy and the created world.

Jesus is the fulfilment of the Jewish temple; in him, in his body, God dwells amongst men, in creation; there is God's glory seen (Jn 1:14) and he offered God perfect worship and obedience. Destroyed, he was raised up to new life – a unity of spirit and transformed matter,

the cornerstone and heart of the new and lasting temple (Jn 2:20). Christ does not worship alone. We have passed from death to life in Christ. God dwells in Christ's body; now he lives in ours. "He will make his home among them, they will be his people, and they will be their God, God-with them (Rev 21:3)". Peter and Paul remind us that, with God's Spirit living in us, we are being built into the new temple founded on Christ (1 Peter 2: 4-10; 1 Cor 3:16-17).

Forming, Feeding and Raising up his Body

How then are we made into living stones in this temple? Christ has raised up a people for himself, liberating and calling us to himself. He has made a new covenant sealed with his blood, uniting us to him as his bride, so completely that we are one body, flesh of his flesh! Thus he feeds us and looks after us (cf Eph 5:29-31). We are simultaneously his people, bride, body and temple, one spiritual-material reality. Christ sealed this covenant at the feast of Passover, giving his flesh, pouring out his blood for the life of the world (cf Jn 6:51). The Jews literally ate the flesh of the slaughtered lamb to receive their share in the blessings of their Passover covenant. Likewise Christ has arranged for us to eat his life-giving flesh. Celebrating his last Passover the night before he died, Jesus "took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to the them, saying 'Take it and eat. This is my body'. He did the same with the cup saying 'Drink from this all of you, for this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the covenant ... (From Mt 26:26-29)". Truly his flesh is real food and his blood is real drink (cf Jn 6:55); feeding on them gives us a share in the covenant of our Passover Lamb – eternal life (cf Jn 6:53-58). We feed and share in his covenant when we celebrate the Eucharist. His original hearers were scandalised that he dared to say he would make a covenant! We are often scandalised or incredulous that he can appear under appearance of bread and wine. Why? If God can become human and then raise that body up with special powers defying the laws of physics which he clearly did then why cannot he not appear under the appearance of bread and wine? Let us take him at his word! 'I am the living bread which has come down from Heaven ... (Jn 6:51). In this Christ unites us to him, sharing his physical and divine nature with us. We are one with him. Gone to Heaven he remains with us. Heaven and earth, the material and spiritual, the created and divine are united in the Incarnation and in the Eucharist. We are already raised up with him – even now in our bodies. He will bring this to completion at the resurrection of the body on the last day (Jn 6:40 etc). How could he neglect his own body, his bride, the temple where he already dwells? He does not wish a divorce but to complete what he has begun (2 Tim 2:11-13).

Priests, Prophets and Kings in Christ's New Creation

Christ is not only the head of a new body of people, he is Head of a whole new creation (Col 1:15-20). It is all to be taken up into the blessings and life of his covenant. It is sacred and will be filled with his presence, part of the New Heaven and New Earth where God dwells (Rev 21:5 etc). Part of God's plan, a work already in process, the creation groans to be brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God (Rom8;22). Our destiny is connected with that of all of creation. Even now we have a role to steward it, bearing in mind the destiny God has assigned to us and it. The bread and wine in the Eucharist are 'fruit of the earth and work of human hands'.

As priests let us gather up all of our being, our work, and all creation and offer it to God in prayer to be transformed. As prophets let us proclaim the Good News in ways that take seriously our bodily reality and the sacred status of creation. As kings let us work to establish a world where God's justice, blessing and peace can break through ever more. Thus let us prepare for the final completion of God's work when he shall come again and God will be all in all.

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