

## 1 The body in question

Underlying all of the post-resurrection appearances there is an unasked question which I have delayed exploring; hoping that, without framing the question, it will be clearly answered for me the next time that Jesus appears. As we approach the end of the post-resurrection accounts, I feel that I can ignore this question no longer and must ask it. What is the nature of the body of the risen Jesus?

Perhaps the first clue comes even before the body has been seen and identified. In John's account of himself and Peter entering the empty tomb (John 20:5-10), we read that they saw and believed, but did not understand. But what had they seen, and what did it mean? The linen wrappings were lying there and, separately, there was the cloth that had been on Jesus' head. First of all, whoever had taken the body had not taken the cloths that Jesus was wrapped in, but Tom Wright suggests that with this unwrapping we are being pointed back to the account of the raising of Lazarus (John 11), when Jesus speaks about the resurrection.<sup>1</sup> But he explains that what happens with Lazarus is not resurrection, but just a form of resuscitation: bringing Lazarus back to life. Lazarus will face death again and Lazarus had to have the body coverings removed from him by Jesus.

Second, Wright argues, the way that the clothes had been laid out suggested that the body hadn't been unwrapped, but it was as if the body had been pulled out, or extracted, from the wrappings. The body appears to be able to pass through the wrappings with the same ease with which it will then go on to pass through locked doors.

The post-resurrection accounts introduce us to something completely new: the resurrection body. The scientific criteria which I want to use to make sense of the post-resurrection appearances just don't seem to work for the body of the risen Jesus. I want to clarify whether it is a physical body or a spiritual presence. It is clearly not a physical body, in the way that I would want to understand this, because it can pass through body wrappings and locked doors and can appear and disappear at will. At the same time, it appears to be a physical body; it can break bread, eat fish and have its wounds touched.

What does the risen Jesus look like? His wounds can be seen at times, but be invisible at other times. His features don't seem to be physically recognisable until after Jesus has been recognised in some other way. I need to find some other criteria, compared with my usual ones, to define the nature of the resurrection body.

Paul helpfully tries to make sense of this dilemma (1 Corinthians 15:35-50), with the analogy of the seed which will grow into wheat or some other grain. Usually what grows doesn't look at all like, or have any similar properties to, the seed that has been planted and given it life. A seed needs to die and be buried before it can grow into what it is intended to become. This transformation is what we observe with Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Similarly we, too, will need to die and be buried before God gives us our resurrection bodies.

Paul goes on to say that what is sown is perishable, but what is raised is imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:42). The resurrection body is not subject to death or corruption; it will not wear out and it is not powered by food or drink. Certainly, from the Emmaus road and Galilee accounts, the resurrection

body can eat bread and fish, but it doesn't need food to fuel it. Paul goes on to say that it is sown as a physical body and it is raised as a spiritual body. This is where we, Christians of the last few centuries, encounter a problem; we have lost sight of how the Jewish people and then the early Christian communities would have understood this.

The real difference, as Paul will go on to say (1 Corinthians 15:47-49), is that 'the first man was from earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven... Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.' Our more recent understanding has re-imagined spiritual as ghostly and not physical. Jewish thinking never had the separation between a physical body and a soul that has developed in recent western thinking. Resurrection was always about the resurrection of a physical, but transformed, body.

When someone dies we will often say, 'Rest in peace.' Many will also add, 'And rise in glory.' The impact of Enlightenment thinking upon Christianity has produced an understanding of Christians going to heaven when they die, where they could rest in peace. The message has become that we escape our physical bodies, and this planet, and take up a spiritual (non-physical) residence in a separate, spiritual, place called heaven. This was never the understanding of Christians until recent centuries. The original vision was that on death we would, in some form, take up temporary residence, where we can 'rest in peace' before the end times come, with the second coming of Jesus. This is in the 'many dwelling-places in my Father's house' (John 14:2) or in 'Paradise' (Luke 23:43), based on an Arabic word and concept of shaded gardens with cool flowing streams. Then, when the new creation occurs, we then will 'rise in glory' and be given our resurrection body.

This presents our rational scientific minds with a lot of questions but, then again, if you told scientists and engineers 50 years ago about the internet or microchips or about some of the (almost) everlasting materials that are available now, I think they would have had similar problems. Recent scientific developments can give helpful analogies in understanding the concept of 'rest in peace and rise in glory'. Tom Wright,<sup>2</sup> while stressing the redemption of creation, and that our resurrection bodies are the transformation of our old bodies and not merely the replacement, précising material from John Polkinghorne,<sup>3</sup> speaks of God downloading our software on to his hardware, until the time when he gives us the new hardware to run the software again. In this analogy, storing of our 'software' on his 'hard drive' corresponds with 'rest in peace' and the gift of the new 'hardware', our transformed resurrection bodies, corresponds with 'rising in glory'.

The Christian understanding of those first disciples and of the church throughout most of history is that the risen Jesus, with his resurrection body, is the 'first fruit' of the new creation and that God's new creation comes from the future to meet us, here and now, in the person of the risen Jesus. But to really understand the concept of our resurrection bodies, and most of what I have said so far in this chapter, we need to understand what is meant by the new creation.

**The apostle Paul uses the analogy of the grain of seed being transformed into a plant. Are there other analogies that you can think of which would be helpful to you in describing how physical bodies are transformed by God into resurrection bodies?**

## Notes

1. Tom Wright, *John for Everyone Part 2* (SPCK, 2002).
2. Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (SPCK, 2007), p. 175. Tom Wright does acknowledge here that some people don't find this analogy helpful. For a further discussion of these issues, *Surprised by Hope* does present a very comprehensive overview of the complex issue of resurrection bodies and the new creation.
3. John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (SPCK, 2002).

## 2 New creation

The Bible begins with the account of God creating the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1) and God acknowledging that creation was very good (Genesis 1:31). We soon read about the fall, or the breakdown in relationships between God and people, people with themselves, people with other people and people and creation. The Bible ends with the new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, with the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven so that the home of God will be among mortals and God will dwell with them (Revelation 21:1-3). This is the truth that we affirm when we say The Lord's Prayer, that prayer which Jesus taught his disciples to say, and use the words, 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven.'

The early church believed strongly in Jesus' second coming, which would herald the new creation, and this belief has existed through most of Christian history; it has, however, been pushed to the margins of mainline Christian belief since the Enlightenment.

It is a big topic to do justice to in a book, let alone in one section of this chapter, but removing the belief in the new creation has huge implications upon our understanding of God's ultimate purposes and what God expects of us. I will mention some of the biblical verses that point towards the new creation, and one that, falsely in my opinion, has been used to counter this view and then explore some of the implications.

We read about the vision of the new heavens and new earth in Isaiah 65:17. The understanding of the resurrection of the dead was held by the Pharisees and most of the Jewish people, but not the Sadducees; the Sadducees only looked to the first five books of the Old Testament and were not influenced by later writers such as Isaiah and the development of Jewish thinking that occurred during the Babylonian exile. The early church would have this Jewish hope in the new creation and believed that Jesus, with his resurrection body, was the first fruit of the new creation. They believed that in the resurrection of Jesus, the future, the age to come, had broken into the present. His resurrection body was the forerunner of the resurrection bodies we would all have as part of the new creation.

Paul implies a belief in the new creation in much of his writing, but spells it out more directly in Romans 8, where he speaks not just of us awaiting our new resurrection bodies but says 'that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay' (v. 21) and goes on to speak of the birth of the new creation: 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now' (v.

22). Peter reminds his readers of Jesus' promise that 'we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home' (2 Peter 3:13).

The verse that has been used to suggest that 'we go to heaven' rather than 'heaven coming to earth' is 1 Thessalonians 4:17, where Paul says, 'Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.' One interpretation, known as the rapture, assumes that Jesus and those caught up in the clouds go back with Jesus to heaven, presumably leaving the earth to be destroyed. This assumption would, of course, contradict the vision of the new creation and heaven coming down to earth that Paul describes in Romans 8.

So how should we understand 1 Thessalonians 4:17? The imagery of the Bible, both in describing the ascension and the Son of Man going up in clouds (Daniel 7), suggests a flat earth with heaven existing above the earth, rather than heaven being a different dimension to our three-dimensional world. Tom Wright states, with regard to the Thessalonians, 'They are like Roman citizens in a colony, going out to meet the emperor when he pays them a state visit, and then accompanying him back to the city itself.'<sup>1</sup> Jesus's second coming heralds the new creation and Jesus brings heaven down to earth. Jesus coming to reign among us can be compared with the emperor returning to rule his people and being welcomed accordingly, outside of the city gates, before returning with his people to the city. Paul paints a picture of the returning Jesus being met in the skies, outside of the earth, before they return with him to earth, where he will rule, rather than going to heaven with him.

If we take away the belief in the new creation, we are left with a world that was created by God and affirmed by God as good, but then became fallen. Instead of God redeeming his creation, he allows his creation to be destroyed, or destroys his creation, and our ultimate destiny is to escape from earth with spiritual rather than resurrection bodies, to live in heaven. This is the belief that, almost by default, we have been largely encouraged to accept in recent centuries. Which understanding of the end times we have makes a huge impact upon how we understand what Jesus was asking his disciples to do when he commissioned them, and the implication for us.

If the plan is that this world just ends, and certain people escape to a spiritual existence in heaven, then the sooner we can help this world to end, the more we are helping God bring about his planned conclusions! If wars wipe out humankind, or global warming destroys the earth, or the earth's resources are all used up with none available for future generations, or pollution, disease, poverty and famine mean that human life ceases to be sustainable, then that ushers in God's plans more rapidly!

Then again, if God intends to redeem and renew his creation and for Jesus to come to rule, so that 'thy will is done on earth as in heaven', our calling is to be cooperating with God in ushering in his new creation. Looking back at the relationships which broke down, within what we describe as the fall, everything that we can do to help restore those broken relationships is helping to prepare for the new creation.

Our calling is to: help restore people's relationship with God so that they can repent and find

forgiveness; bring about reconciliation; help bring people back into full relationship with other people, and groups and nations back into full and harmonious relationships with other groups and nations; bring about the justice and righteousness that God seeks; transform the unjust relationships which exploit people; heal physical, mental and spiritual disease so that people's dis-ease with themselves is healed; bring back humanity's relationship with the whole of God's creation - this would include tackling the causes of climate change and pollution. To do this means denouncing the idols of our day, which are represented by the worship of power, greed and lust, all of which destroy the relationships which God wants restored.

Our calling is not just to do these in the short term, because it would be a nice thing to do while we wait for the earth to come to an end, so that we can escape it to heaven. We are called to do this because it is helping to usher in the new creation. But there are huge forces at work to counter this vision of the new creation. The idols of power, greed and lust have a lot invested, and a lot of money to be made, in exploiting the world's resources, exploiting the world's disagreements and selling arms, exploiting the world's broken relationships and exploiting our broken relationship with God. Perhaps it is because there are such powerful forces at work to counter this vision that we have found ourselves opting for the 'destroy the earth and go to heaven' option instead! It is because God wants us to be co-workers with him as we prepare for God to usher in the new creation that Jesus commissioned us, as part of his church, in the ways described in the previous chapter.

**What are the implications, for you, of a belief in a new creation for the way in which you live out your life as we await the second coming and the new creation?**

## Notes

1. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (SPCK, 2002).

## 3 Ascension

A church that we used to worship at hosted the annual Good Friday Churches Together service, following the March of Witness. One year, during the first hymn, our pipe organ produced a horrible groan and appeared to give out its last breath. Fortunately, the service could continue on a piano that was also available within the church. Going to church on Easter Sunday, we expected that we wouldn't be able to get the full Easter joy into our singing with the piano but, it seemed miraculously, the organ had come back to life and we celebrated Easter appropriately. Was I the only one who went to church on Ascension Day full of anticipation as to how the organ might behave, and whether or not it would remain rooted to the ground? But the organ had been resuscitated for Easter Day; it hadn't been resurrected and so it stayed firmly in place for the Ascension Day service. It did, however, breathe its last shortly after that and was replaced with an electronic organ.

A few years ago, the then-vicar of our current church introduced the practice on Ascension Day of ending the evening service by launching a rocket. It probably adds one or two people, including some children, to what is usually a poorly attended service. Analogies can be helpful, but usually

only work to a certain extent. You can only hope that whoever discovers the burnt-out shell of the rocket isn't aware of what the rocket was meant to represent until it reached the pinnacle of its journey upwards!

I have memories of worshipping in a chapel dedicated to Jesus' ascension. On entering this chapel for the first time you would be struck, hopefully metaphorically rather than literally, by the legs that hung down from the ceiling. My imagination wants to explore above the ceiling to discover if the rest of Jesus is there. But, while below the ceiling we have the earthly realm, above the ceiling represents the heavenly realm. So, in my imagination, I realise that the rest of Jesus is there, in the heavenly realm, but is beyond my sight.

We are trapped in our three-dimensional understanding of the world to only be able to think in three dimensions. In biblical times the earth was assumed to be flat, so the Bible visualises heaven as existing above us as an extra dimension. The understanding of the earth being spherical, rather than flat, shows us the limitations of such a perspective. We need to understand heaven as being an extra dimension, that we can't see or visualise, in addition to our three-dimensional world. The resurrected Jesus can exist both in our world and within this heavenly dimension; both on earth and in heaven. Jesus' vanishing and reappearing is when he moves from the earthly dimension to the heavenly dimension and back again.

The ascension marks the moment when Jesus feels that his earthly ministry has been completed. It is when Jesus completes his meetings with his followers within the earthly dimension and moves back to the heavenly dimension, where he will remain until the end times and his second coming. As with the stories of the empty tomb, we have angels present. They give a message to the disciples that Jesus could have given in person, but they mark the next rite of passage in Jesus' life. We are reminded that in the ascension, we have an event of similar significance to both the birth and the resurrection of Jesus.

Luke presents us with two accounts of the ascension. In most ways, the version in Acts is fuller than that at the end of Luke's gospel, so we tend to ignore Luke's gospel account. It does, however, add some extra elements. Here we read: 'And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God' (Luke 24:49-53).

We will consider worship in the next section, but here I will focus upon the great joy that they experienced. Jesus' post-resurrection appearances begin with the absence of the physical Jesus and great confusion, despair and fear. The post-resurrection appearances end with the absence of the physical Jesus and, although this great joy is not referred to Act's account of the ascension, they end with great joy. Although Jesus will no longer physically be with the disciples, they have been promised that Jesus will send his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to be with them. As we follow some of their stories in Acts, we will see how these disciples have changed since the despair after the crucifixion; we will see that they don't have all of the answers by any means, and will need to continue to learn and find Jesus in new ways, but they experience joy because they are assured that Jesus is in control

and will be with them in a new way. They don't yet have the gift of the Holy Spirit - they will need to become twelve again and wait upon God's timing for the right moment for that experience - but they do experience joy.

It is because of their great joy, and the confidence which underlies their great joy, that we can share in this confidence and great joy. We might find times when we are aware of the absence of Jesus; we might experience times when we are waiting for evidence of the Holy Spirit as a gift that Jesus has sent upon his church, but we are inheritors of this great joy. The post-resurrection accounts are the story of how the disciples are taken from the confusion, despair and fear caused by the loss of Jesus to the joy and sense of expectation that comes from knowing that they have the secrets of how to find, and be empowered by, the risen Jesus.

**How can you share the great joy that we have as a result of our faith, in ways that do not appear as superficial to non-Christians?**

## **4 Prayer and worship**

The account of the ascension in Luke's gospel ends with the disciples worshipping Jesus and blessing God in the temple. I find that my understanding of worship and prayer is enriched by thinking of that sculpture of the ascending Jesus. That plaster sculpture represents a Jesus who can not only exist both on earth as in heaven, but also freely move from earth to heaven and back again. In my prayerful reflections I find that I am free to push Jesus up, further into heaven, or to pull him down further into the earthly realm. We read of the disciples taking hold of Jesus' feet and worshipping him (Matthew 28:9); there are references in the psalms to worshipping at God's footstall (Psalm 95:6; 99:5; 132:7). In my prayers and worship, I can become like the women who wash Jesus' feet with their tears (Luke 7:36-38) or anoint his feet with expensive perfume (John 12:1-8), I can cling on to Jesus feet.

By clinging on to Jesus' feet, it is as if I can pull him back to earth to be with me so that I can experience Jesus standing beside me. In my pain and need and in my intercession and worship, I can sense the physical presence of Jesus, with his feet firmly planted on the ground beside me. He might be encouraging or affirming me and telling me what I should do, or he might just be there listening while I hold on and worship him. But also, by clinging on to his feet, in my joy and worship, I can allow him to lift me up heavenward so that as his body vanishes into the heavenly realm, I can get close enough to hear the worship of heaven, or possibly gain a little glimpse of that dimension and experience a foretaste of heaven.

We are given a pointer towards this when Jacob had a strange dream at Bethel of angels ascending and descending a heavenly ladder, which formed a portal between earth and heaven (Genesis 28:10-22). It was within this dream that God passes on his original blessing, which he gave to Abraham, to apply to Jacob. Part of this blessing is that Jacob's descendants will be a blessing to the nations. Jacob anoints the rock he had rested his head upon and declares that it is a house of God. The risen and ascended Jesus becomes for us that house of God, that place where heaven and earth meet, the heavenly ladder, the portal between heaven and earth. Jesus is the one who can stand

beside us comforting us as we face our earthly concerns, and who can also lift us up to give us a foretaste of heaven.

I don't know how you conclude your prayers, who you address them to; I have always been in the habit of addressing my prayers, to God the Father, through Jesus Christ. I believe that I am prompted by the Holy Spirit to pray to God the Father, through Jesus Christ the Son. I do this because Jesus is the one who has been incarnate and fully understands our human condition, but who also dwells within the heavenly realm. Jesus is the one who can interpret my inadequate words and strangely formed thoughts and feelings to God the Father within the heavenly realm.

Jesus is also the lens that we possess to make sure that we are aiming our prayers at God the Father rather than at a god who we have created in our own image. Psalm 115 highlights the dangers of creating our gods and worshipping them. With regard to creating and worshipping false gods we are warned, 'Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them' (v. 8). Another way of stating this is: 'We become what we worship.' This is why the message against idolatry comes over so strongly in the prophets. It is not just that prayers offered to idols are missed opportunities to pray to the living God, but by praying to false gods we become more like those false gods. If we worship the ways of the world, rather than God, we will find ourselves becoming worldlier. If we worship power, we will seek power rather than God; if we worship wealth more than God, we will seek wealth; if we worship worldly success, we will seek worldly success rather than seeking the true and living God.

Philip asks Jesus how we can know God the Father and is told, 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9). Offering our prayers to the Father should require us to look at Jesus' example and teaching to check out whether what we are praying for and what we are worshipping is really the God who is revealed to us in Jesus. This should be a way of avoiding idolatry and of helping us to become more like the God that we worship, who is revealed to us through Jesus.

I am strangely encouraged by the last reference to worship in Matthew's gospel. It reads, 'Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted' (Matthew 28:16-17). Even in doubt, the appropriate response is still to worship.

I believe that in both prayer and worship we can be put in touch with Jesus in new ways and experience him at work within our lives. Worship and prayer can move us on from doubt to new and stronger understandings of Jesus at work in our lives and in the world.

The ascension marks the end of the post-resurrection appearances, but also marks the beginning of the new relationship that the disciples, and ourselves, are offered with Jesus through our worship and prayer so that we can both experience Jesus' presence with us on earth, but also be lifted up to gain visions of heaven. Before this can be completed, the disciples need to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and there is one other thing that needs to happen before then. Jesus had chosen twelve disciples to represent the completeness of his mission to the twelve tribes of Israel, but Judas had killed himself. Jesus, representing Israel, needed to become complete again. It would only be after a twelfth disciple was appointed that the Holy Spirit would be given. The period between Ascension



and Pentecost gives us a short pause, but there are still some issues to reflect upon as we await the gift of the Holy Spirit.

**How do you use Jesus as a lens to make sure that your prayers to the Father, through Jesus the Son, are focused upon the Father that is revealed to us by the Son?**

## 5 Losing Jesus

This series takes its title from the first words in John's account of the resurrection appearances, when Mary Magdalen, after discovering the empty tomb, tells Peter and John about this with the words, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him' (John 20:2). The post-resurrection appearances end with the ascension and the eleven disciples looking up at the ascending Jesus as he disappears from their sight for the final time. These two events, and all that occurs in between, are bookended by the appearance of angels and messages from angels.

Although we start without the physical body of the risen Jesus and we end without the physical body of the risen Jesus, somehow, with all that happens in between these two events, the attitude of the disciples has been completely transformed. They have been taken on an emotional rollercoaster, their faith has been challenged and their understanding of who Jesus is has been hugely changed. They have been given a new understanding of his purposes and, through this, of their purposes and they have been given their own responsibility and affirmation in their part of these responsibilities which are part of God's purposes.

Although the disciples are full of joy and hope after the ascension, that isn't always the way that Christians feel today. As we look around us at our world, our churches and the position of those churches within the world, there might be times when we might be tempted to repeat those words, 'They have taken the Lord,' and do so with that same sense of fear and despair experienced by the women at the empty tomb. Earlier I have mentioned that only a third of the population can be considered as churched, a third unchurched: having never had an understanding of the Christian message or a relationship with church. The remaining third are described as de-churched; those who once had connections with the church in some way, but no longer do so.

The temptation in a situation like this is to ignore the problem and hope it goes away; the reality is that if we ignore the problem, then it is likely that more Christians go away. The only real way forward is to try to identify what is happening and why. If we feel as if 'They have taken the Lord', then we first need to try to work out, who 'they' are. Having done that, we may be able to find the Lord again. Let us consider some of the 'usual suspects'.

**Post- or late-Christendom:** I mentioned at the beginning of the first chapter how the shops used to be closed on Good Friday, it also doesn't seem so long ago that nearly all shops were also closed on Sundays. Going back to when I was young, then, apart from going to church, there wasn't really much that was organised and open that you could do on a Sunday. There is now far less coverage of Christianity in the media and often the coverage that is there, in television programmes and

newspaper articles, is negative, designed to mock Christianity rather than to affirm it. When church leaders speak out on issues, then much of the media will try to find ways to undermine their stance.

Many civic ceremonies or meetings used to begin with Christian prayer or worship, but that is gradually being eradicated. We hear of Christians being banned from wearing crosses, or other Christian symbolism, in the work place. The position of the church and of Christians has increasingly been pushed away from the centre. The Jesus who appeared to have quite a prominent position within our society and within our national events appears to have been taken away; so we might argue that it was the demise of Christendom that took the Lord.

**Post-modernity:** The Enlightenment gave us modernity and an understanding that there was a particular way of looking at things and, once this was discovered, then humans could make total sense of the world in which they lived; there was a particular narrative to be understood and defended. Christianity was part of this narrative. Post-modernity gave a voice and validity to the other narratives, the other ways of interpreting events. Generally, throughout history, it has been the victors who have written the history and so the other narratives have been lost and forgotten. Post-modernity, which has increasingly evolved in recent decades, has affirmed the right of the different narratives to be heard.

One aspect of this is pluralism; we are increasingly exposed to the views of other world faiths. When you consider yourself the majority faith, then there is the temptation to not really take other faiths very seriously. There might be a feeling that if you are the majority, then it means that you are right. When you are in a minority, you know that you need to try to understand the other person's perspective before getting into any discussion. Christians have often been ill-prepared for discussion with those of other faiths. Christians, either because of a lack of understanding of their own faith or out a sense of guilt because of the arrogance of past generations, can easily retreat to an 'all faiths equally lead to God' position; an understanding that has more to do with Hinduism than Christianity. We could argue that pluralism has taken Jesus.

Over the years, Christ and Christianity have become increasingly marginalised from Christmas. Terms like 'Happy holidays', 'Winterval' and 'Season's greetings' have often replaced references to Christmas on Christmas cards. A few years ago an Education Authority decided that Christmas should not be celebrated at all within its schools as it was insensitive to other faith views. The local Muslim Associations made it very clear that Jesus is referred to and honoured in the Koran, Muslims have great respect for the Virgin Mary and they were very happy for their children to celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas. The reality was that secular groups were very happy to try to use the 'religious sensitivity' argument to push a secular agenda.

Secularism is another aspect of the pluralism of post-modernism. Originally the word meant a divide between church and state, and was a counter to the blurring of boundaries that Christendom had caused. Increasingly we come across an aggressive secularism, which promotes an anti-religious agenda and, in a country once considered as Christian, an anti-Christian agenda. We could argue that secularism has taken Jesus.

Post-modernity has also opened society up to new ways of learning. Learning has moved from

didactic to discovery. Modernity assumed that there was one story; one way of interpreting things, and that story should be presented to people verbally through a talk or lecture, or in written form through an article or book. Post-modernity encourages people to reflect on different narratives or interpretations and to discover truth for themselves. Churches are designed with pulpits so that the usual way of communicating is through a sermon which can be delivered 'six feet above contradiction'. If your way of learning has been shaped by post-modernity and the only way that Jesus is being presented is through a didactic methodology, then you have less opportunity to discover Jesus. We could suggest that non-didactic methodology has taken Jesus.

**Generational issues:** The move away from didactic learning to learning through discovery is obviously an issue that impacts upon different generations in different ways. The age profile of our churches shows that congregations are becoming more elderly and the church, if not Jesus, appears less relevant to younger people. There has been much written on the subject, but some key issues to consider, if the church is going to make Christianity more relevant to younger people, are that younger people are more likely to:

- be committed to Christ, rather than human institutions, such as the church;
- be interested in mission, and issues such as global warming, than church meetings;
- hold together faith with other aspects of life, meaning that they are engaging with non-Christians and non-Christian values and seeking teaching which helps them explore this;
- value their own identity and are able to affirm diversity and aren't afraid of difference, being able to see a creative tension within diversity and generally good team players rather than needing to 'own and control' their own areas of responsibility;
- want to do and experience and reflect upon their experiences, rather than talking and studying;
- be open about their own vulnerability, and their needs, including for a healthy work/life balance, but needing affirmation;
- have a desire for truth and authenticity, with a hatred of hypocrisy, meaning that they question authority and want proof that leaders have the ability to lead.<sup>1</sup>

If the church isn't moving in these directions, then it can easily appear as if, for a whole generation, Jesus has been taken.

**What other factors, not mentioned here, might make it possible for people to lose sight of Jesus?**

## Notes

1. Stuart Buchanan, *Called by God?* (SPCK, 2008), pp. 31-3

## 6 Finding Jesus

I enjoy 'whodunit?' detective programmes on television. With the two-hour versions, on commercial

television, you know that during the second half of the programme you will be introduced to a succession of suspects. All have the motive, and all initially appear to have the opportunity to have committed the crime. When you reach the final advert break, before the programme's conclusion, you know that it was probably none of the suspects that have been introduced and considered so far. The real culprit will be revealed immediately after the advert break. Having considered some of the suspects, in the previous section, I can now attempt to reveal who I think took the Lord.

In this series I have gathered and considered the biblical evidence from all of those who witnessed the risen Jesus in the days immediately after the resurrection. I have tried to crosscheck each of their testimonies against those of the other witnesses and also considered some 'expert witnesses' from elsewhere in the Bible. I have carefully considered who has taken the Lord, but I have concluded that it wasn't abduction after all; it has been a case of mistaken identity!

The first clues come from the statements on Easter Day. The women at the tomb were looking for the crucified Jesus; that is why they couldn't initially recognise the resurrected Jesus. The disciples that Jesus met on the road to Emmaus described the Jesus that they were looking for. It was a Jesus who would redeem Israel. They were looking for a Jesus who would use his power to save their nation, a type of Christendom Jesus. Again, it was a case of mistaken identity; they were looking for the wrong Jesus.

If you think that Jesus has been taken, then I believe that something similar is happening. I suggest that the Jesus who you assume has been taken is not the risen Jesus; it is the Christendom Jesus. The risen Jesus continues to go where he wants and to meet with, and reveal himself to, whom he wishes. It isn't him who has been taken; it is the Christendom Jesus who we have lost. As the era of Christendom fades, and comes to an end, it should always have been expected that the Christendom Jesus would start to fade and be difficult to see and would then eventually vanish completely from sight.

The risen Jesus of the post-resurrection appearances was the same Jesus as the Jesus of the pre-Christendom era. The Jesus who was followed, worshipped and witnessed to by a persecuted minority on the margins of society, the Jesus who is still obvious to the persecuted and marginalised and who is still followed, worshipped and witnessed to by them - they know that he is still there and find him easily.

Remembering Jesus as our Passover, the construction of the Christendom Jesus is a bit like the time when the Israelites decided to build a golden image of a calf to worship instead of worshipping the true and living God. The Christendom Jesus is like an idol which has been built in our own image, formed of gold to make it look wealthy and important so that it embraces the ways of the world, rather than the ways of God.

To the world, the Christendom Jesus made of gold and wealth, was a beautiful object to look at and was the envy of the world, unlike the resurrected Jesus, who is disfigured by the marks of crucifixion and sacrificial love. The resurrected Jesus has always still been there; it is just that we have easily been dazzled by the gold of the Christendom Jesus: the Jesus who represents wealth, power, privilege and success. The good news is that as the Christendom Jesus fades and vanishes from

sight, we are less likely to be dazzled and distracted by the Christendom Jesus and it becomes easier to see, recognise and follow the risen Jesus.

And that, of course, is what the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus have been all about. Jesus was showing his followers where to look and how to recognise him after he ascended and vanished from their sight. Jesus knew that there would be times when we might feel that he had been taken and that we would need these lessons so that we would be able to find him again. The Christendom Jesus was easy to recognise, because you didn't have any choice in the matter; he had to be believed in. Recognising and believing in the risen Jesus takes time because it is an experience and a journey and a gradual revelation. Meeting this risen Jesus involves letting go of a fixed vision of Jesus and recognising him in new places and re-interpreting the scriptures to understand better what he is doing in new places. Meeting the risen Jesus requires having our understanding challenged and expanded.

With Thomas, we can expect to recognise the resurrected Jesus when we respond to the invitation to touch the wounds. With all of the disciples, we can expect to hear about him when we take seriously the perspective of those who have been marginalised in society, like the women at the tomb. We can expect to meet the risen Jesus when we are in the Galilees of: our everyday lives; other faiths and world views; compromise and ambiguity.

A favourite experiment, conducted by physics teachers, is to place a lighted candle on a saucer and cover it with an inverted jam jar. Very soon, the flame goes red before going out. The flame needs oxygen to continue burning so is extinguished. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus explains that no one puts a lamp under a bushel (Matthew 5:15) because it wouldn't be seen. But if your 'bushel' is also airtight, then the lamp will go out. It is the same with the church and mission. If the church isn't involved in mission, then it goes out. The church needs the 'oxygen' of the world to continue burning; if our faith is kept in an airtight container, away from the oxygen of the world, then it too, can go out.

With the commissioned disciples, we will find that we encounter the risen Jesus when we, with the authority of the Father, empowered by the Holy Spirit, are sent with vulnerability as the Father sent Jesus to carry out Jesus' commission. I mentioned, in part 1 chapter 1, the sense of vulnerability that we experienced during our Good Friday Procession of Witness when the shops were opened and the empty streets were full of shoppers and the roads were full of traffic. Of course, the real vulnerability was that our Procession of Witness had actually become an act of witness to the world, rather than just to members of other churches! We realised that we might be seen by people who we knew who were out shopping; we might need to explain to our non-Christian friends what we were doing and why we thought that Good Friday, and what Jesus did was important. We might need to explain why, despite the narrative of what happened that day, we called it Good Friday!

It is in proclaiming the risen Jesus, be it to those who are familiar with the story, those who once knew it but have given up on it, or those who have never heard it before, that we find we need to re-evaluate who Jesus really is for us, and what we need to say about him in the context that we find ourselves in, that we gain new understandings about who Jesus really is for us. Teaching and making disciples is no longer a one-way process. As Peter brought Cornelius and his household to faith,

Peter found that he was gaining new insights about God and his purposes. Being involved in teaching and making disciples in late/post-Christendom involves both parties in discovery.

It is when we take God's creation seriously, appreciating it for the wonderful, beautiful gift that it is, rather than seeing it as a resource to be exploited, that we will rediscover some of wonders of God revealed within his creation. It is when we show love for other people, including the unlovable, that we can get a better understanding of God's love for us. When we seek to transform and reconcile, we can find ourselves being transformed and reconciled. It is in helping people find Jesus's direction and forgiveness in their lives that we get back in touch with the Jesus who forgives and accepts us as we meet Jesus afresh at the foot of the cross.

In one of Matthew's accounts of Jesus' teaching, Jesus instructs the disciples not to stop the children coming to him, and says that 'it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs' (Matthew 19:14). In the paragraphs about generational issues, above, we may find pointers which will help us look at Jesus in a fresh way, to see following Jesus as being more about a movement than an institution, and being about discovering new insights rather than just being instructed. As with Jesus' comments to his disciples, we should expect to learn how to learn from younger people.

If we feel that 'they have taken the Lord', then I believe that in the post-resurrection appearances Jesus presented us with the clues so that we can find him again. The crucified Jesus needed to be taken so that the disciples could meet, discover, worship, understand and follow the risen Jesus. The Christendom Jesus needs to vanish so that we can fully understand, worship and follow the risen Jesus, and not confuse him with the Christendom Jesus. The risen Jesus needed to ascend, so that he and the Father could send his Holy Spirit to guide and assist us in fulfilling his commission, the commission to prepare for Jesus' second coming when he will rule in his kingdom here on earth, as in heaven.

**What are the implications for you when you affirm that Christ has risen? What are the differences, if any, in how you have answered this question now, compared with answering it in part 1 chapter 1?**