



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Easter-Year B-April 18th 2021

Readings: Acts 3: 13-15. 17-19, Psalm 4, 1 John 2: 1-5, Luke 24: 35-48

Appropriately, in this season of the Resurrection, death is making all the headlines.

Yesterday the nation paused to pay its respects and offer prayers for the repose of the soul of Prince Philip – and to surround his grieving family in their inevitable time of distress. Those of us who have always appreciated his straight talking, no-nonsense, man's man approach have been shocked – but not surprised by the sudden companionship of unlikely fans. I had to turn the Radio off after the umpteenth journo was wheeled on to remind us that the caricature of a gaffe prone, ante-diluvian old buffoon was not the reality of this complex, brave, loyal, highly intelligent and far-sighted man who inspired young people with his scheme and talked about the environment when no-one else was listening. Who, I asked myself loudly, as I switched off, had created the demeaning caricature in the first place if not the dreary ratpack journos whose own lives usually bore little examination.

Ah, well, death is a great reminder. I imagine Philip sparing a wry smile, on his journey through the Purification, at the contortions of his erstwhile traducers.

The question is, the question that death raises, what happens next? We are told that Philip was a man of profound faith and, although his adjustment from Orthodoxy to a bizarre but functioning constitutional settlement that saw him married to the Supreme Governor of this unique self-created outpost of the church must have had its quirky moments, there is no doubt of his sincerity.

Part of the question, sharply put by a service shorn of ghastly eulogy and bleating sermon, is answered by this morning's Gospel.

We do not need telling that, after birth, death is the most radical discontinuity that we will know.

In death.....

The cessation of life as we know it obtains. The recognisable is now removed. The body, by which we knew one another, is now an empty house. Its long and loyal service is now over. The mortal fabric of our being is heir to decay.

For the agnostic only a wistful uncertainty obtains.

For the atheist, dress it up as he may, what once stirred the great chemistry of love and emotion is forever consigned to disintegration in the great recycling bin of the indifferent cosmos.

For the believer there is a radically different narrative. Death, like birth, marks a transition. Whereas birth, humanly speaking, marks the moment when the invisible becomes visible, death does the opposite. The visible becomes the invisible. The body, like the womb from which it long ago emerged, becomes an empty house, the support mechanisms discarded, revered but redundant scrap.

But the Christian narrative does not reject the notion of the BODY. The experience is not of some ethereal spiritual entity dissolving into some primordial cosmic ether, unidentifiable and impersonal.

The Resurrection of Christ tells us several key things about our future. When Christ Jesus, God incarnate, took on our humanity, He did not do so partially. He was not a ghost in the machine, a dualistic creature, looking like mortal man but marionetted by a possessing god. In Christ, God became Man. That is He took on our whole humanity, body and soul.

Only thus could He genuinely encounter death, our death, and defeat it and transform the outcome of our mortality. This necessarily means the rescue of the whole man, body as well as soul. For the body is that in which we live and move and identify and relate and love and worship. It is also who we are.

So, when Jesus is raised from the dead, several things become apparent. He is a raised body – Thomas can touch Him. He walks to Emmaus. He

cooks a barbeque on the beach. He dines with the disciples. There is a continuity here of redeemed physicality.

In contrast the new Resurrection body is also different. He is not always recognised by even the closest. He is the gardener to the weeping Magdalen. He is the disguised stranger on the road. He is the fisherman's friend on the Galilee shoreline. He is the revealed Presence in the Emmaus pub and the sudden companion in the locked Jerusalem room.

There is both continuity and radical change. We begin to grasp something of the prophetic mystery of the Transfiguration – the humanity radiating the divine glory. We see what we have known but it is now utterly transformed by glory, humanity released into its ultimate destiny of the companionship and co-inherence of the divine.

Nowhere is this more profoundly displayed than in the opening of the Apocalypse where John, who once lay on Christ's breast at Supper encounters the figure 'with hair like snow, eyes like burning flame, feet like burnished bronze and a voice like the roar of the ocean' – and faints at His feet only to be greeted by this the Risen and Glorified Lord.

We are what we are.....but also, in Christ, the beginnings of what we shall be. In this there is both the promise of personal survival and recognisable identity and reunion, both with fellow believers and with God. We are, in Christ then, also what we shall be after the Purification.

As St Paul puts it in his great chapters on the Risen Life,

'We, who have been modelled on the earthly man shall be modelled on the heavenly man. This perishable shall put on the imperishable, this mortal shall put on immortality. The knowledge I have now is imperfect, partial. Then I shall know fully – as I am known. Now we see through a glass darkly. Then we shall see face to face.'

For those of us wrestling with the remorseless decline of this house of clay, the Resurrection Body becomes daily more attractive and a source of profound anticipation and joyful hope.

Difficult to think of any prospect or promise more exciting.