

UNIT 3: THE RESURRECTION AND THEOLOGY

According to the theologian Gareth Jones, the resurrection has three aspects of particular theological significance:

- First, it is 'eschatological miracle' that God is revealed as present in the world. Faith, then, goes 'beyond the limits of Jesus' death on the cross';
- Second, resurrection has a historical resonance in as much as it is 'foundational for the Church as a community'; and it is central to Christian belief and worship;
- Third, Jesus' resurrection is 'the first-fruits of the last resurrection; and encompasses the resurrection of all people.'¹

If this is all true, then Jesus' resurrection is an *event* which reveals to the world something of the wider significance of Jesus himself. It demonstrates Jesus' eschatological significance (how he is related to the final eschatological resurrection of all people) as a result of the 'encounter, in the resurrection, of historical existence (time) and God's revelation (eternity)'.² While apparently an event in history, then, the resurrection in fact is also the sundering of history as eternity breaks into it. As such the resurrection might well occur in history, but it is no mere historical event. Bultmann refers to Easter faith as the 'self-attestation of the risen Lord'.³ While this self-attestation must have demonstrated that Jesus was personally alive, it does not explain the nature of his resurrected person, if indeed that is significant at all.

Paul describes the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus with the word '*opthe*', usually associated with appearances of God or God's angel. He refers to his own experience of the risen Christ as 'a revelation' (Gal. 1:16), 'a seeing' (1 Cor. 9:1) and 'an appearance' (1 Cor. 15:8), all of which seems to suggest a visionary experience rather than objective sightings, though this does not do complete justice to the gospel accounts of Jesus appearing to the disciples. Nevertheless, even in the gospel accounts something is clearly different about Jesus. He seems to appear and disappear, some believe while others doubt, he is both recognizable and

¹ Gareth Jones, 'The Resurrection in Contemporary Systematic Theology', in

² Jones, 'The Resurrection in Contemporary Systematic Theology', p. 36.

³ See H. W. Batsch, *Kerygma and Myth* (London: Harper, 1961), p. 42.

unrecognized. Such accounts give rise in some quarters to speculation about the nature of the appearances (whether they were subjective visions or objective appearances, for example). This need not concern us here as we are concerned with the theological significance of these appearances. Nevertheless, the starting point is the claim, helpfully articulated by the New Testament scholar C. F. D. Moule, that 'the material of which the body [of Jesus] was composed was somehow transformed into a different mode of existence'.⁴ The continuity with the pre-crucifixion Jesus and the clear discontinuity which suggests a difference which could render him unrecognizable, suggests that the resurrected body has eschatological significance.

There is clearly, then, a relationship between resurrection and *time*, and this is related to the doctrine of incarnation. Incarnation emphasizes two crucial points. The first is that the *body* of Jesus is in itself significant. There cannot be a disembodied *incarnation*. If the *body* of Jesus is significant in incarnation, then it follows that there is something significant too in Jesus' body in the resurrection. Alongside this, incarnation, like resurrection, is an eschatological event. It is not bound by space and time but marks the interruption of history by eternity. Thus, 'God in entering time enters *all* time, so that *all* time in consequence enters God'. In this way the incarnation, resurrection and subsequent ascension are both 'singular and universal events'. Thus 'they are Jesus' but they are ours, too'.

Hence, people anywhere in the world, at any time, can speak of Jesus' resurrection as their resurrection, because God has made their time *God's* time, because *all* time is now present as Christ in eternity.⁵

All this serves to emphasize the relationship between time and eternity over issues of space and context. Time is always both 'universal' and 'local'. In this way such an emphasis on time avoids the difficulties of trying to emphasize the particular contextual circumstances of Jesus' world and how it relates to the context of Christian believers. And the implications of this emphasis on time and eternity in the resurrection of Jesus is what enables it to have more general and universal significance. Space binds the resurrection to context; time enables it to have a wider significance.

⁴ C. F. D. Moule *The Significance of the Message for Faith in Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1968), p. 118.

⁵ Jones, 'The Resurrection in Contemporary Systematic Theology', p. 41.

This issue of time is characterized by Johann-Baptist Metz as the confrontation between the Nietzschean understanding of 'time without a finale', that time possesses an 'eternal' dimension, and 'the biblical, apocalyptic message of time that is limited'.⁶ According to Metz, Nietzsche announced – probably unwittingly – the tyranny of time. 'God is dead', he famously proclaimed, and all that is left to rule over humankind is time itself. This time might be an ever-evolving movement towards some kind of perfection (Hegel), or it might be the stage on which human beings work out their own, more perfect destiny (Marx), but either way it offers only a circular or spiraling working-out of the years in a continual movement towards an always unachievable goal.

In contrast to this, the biblical image of time concerns the *end* of time. This is not 'a catastrophe-driven assumption about the moment when the world comes to an end' but it is 'an attempt to disclose the limited nature of world time, an attempt to temporalize the world against the horizon of temporally limited time'.⁷ This does not devalue time into the status of a waiting room whose occupants should seek to reduce their waiting time. Instead, the limited nature of time, and the eschatological element which gives it meaning, enables the valuing of time itself. Time is important because of its eschatological orientation. In other words, time is significant only because it is orientated towards the *eschaton*. There are potentially huge implications to this in how history is understood and how the resurrection of Jesus relates to this.

According to Karl Barth, the resurrection of Jesus 'cannot be thought of as history'.⁸ Barth's assertion stems from his belief that the resurrection contains no analogy in any other realm of human action or experience. As a result, it 'transcends' history. Nevertheless, Barth maintained that the resurrection occurred, in the same way as the crucifixion occurred: 'it happened in the same sense as the crucifixion happened, in the human sphere and in human time, as an actual

⁶ Johann-Baptist Metz, 'Time without a Finale', in Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity and Modernity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 79.

⁷ Metz, 'Time without a Finale', p. 82.

⁸ Quoted in Moule, *The Significance of the Message of the Resurrection for Faith in Jesus Christ*, p. 118.

event within the world with an objective content'.⁹ Thus while the resurrection really happened, the criteria of historical inquiry will not necessarily lead to discovering its true significance. The resurrection is more the eschatological sundering of time than the evolutionary progress of history.

⁹ Quoted in Moule, *The Significance of the Message of the Resurrection for Faith in Jesus Christ*, p. 117.