



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, May 22, 2010
The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Festal Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.

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THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY, AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING. AMEN.
(Apostles' Creed Series, Sermon 15)

Before it ends with belief in life everlasting, the Creed affirms “the resurrection of the body.” Thus the end of the Creed reminds us that we are human beings all the way to the end. To be human is to be a complex reality that is generally talked about as having both body and soul. God sent his Son as a human being to save us precisely as human beings, and it is as human beings that we will be raised at the last day. This is an astonishing doctrine, and often, in my experience, comes as a surprise to people when they start digging into what the Christian faith really holds. It would be much easier to believe that the real human being is something that’s “inside” our bodies; that the “real me” is something like the software that just happens to be running on this hardware (my body) for now, but could run on other hardware and perhaps even run without hardware of any sort; easier, that is, to believe that this body is just a tool that I use (and that I can alter and change at will) rather than that this body is essentially me. Yet that is exactly what Christians believe. And we believe that, at the end, every human being rises from the dead as a complete human being, including a body that has been resurrected.

What will those resurrection bodies be like?

The ever-reliable (and in this case delightful) Thomas Aquinas has four things to say about the quality or character of resurrection bodies [in his sermon-lectures on the Apostles’ Creed, although we could just as well turn to the closing book (XXII) of St Augustine’s *City of God*]. First, the body that is raised has *identity*. It is the same body, in its flesh and bones. He cites Job [19:25f]: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed [that is, after I’ve died], then *in my flesh I shall see God*.” Yet, although the same body, it will have a different *condition*, namely it will be incorruptible. This is not good news for everybody, according to Aquinas, for he holds that both the godly and the ungodly, in fact every human being who has ever lived, will rise at that last day and receive a body. The incorruptible bodies of the good shall be unchangingly in glory; those of the evil, unchangingly in pain. Thirdly, the resurrection bodies will have the *integrity* that belongs to the human being: there will be no deafness, blindness, or other defects. And fourth, on top of its identity, incorruptibility, and integrity, Aquinas speaks to the *age* of the resurrection body. He avers that every body will be in its perfect state, which is, he says, 32 or 33 years old. His reason for saying this is drawn from the sort of blunt observation that we might find (to say the least) indelicate. He says those who are younger than 32 or 33 have not yet achieved a perfect state. And those who are older have lost it!

There is more that can be said about the quality of the resurrected bodies of the saints. They will shine like the sun; they will be invulnerably strong (with no tears and no dying); they will be agile, leaping forth like sparks in tinder; and they will be, Aquinas says, *soulful*, totally subject to the spirit. (The risen bodies of the damned will be the opposite: darkened, vulnerable, weighed down, and carnal.)

So it is, I say, an astonishing doctrine of Christianity, that the body will be resurrected, that we will be human beings for ever and ever. What, then, is “the life everlasting” with which the Creed concludes? What is the end of the saints who enjoy resurrected bodies?

It seems right to say, as many saints do, that it’s like being married to God, being closer to God than we could ever imagine. We are promised (St. Paul says it) that, although now we see as through a glass darkly, then we shall see face to face. Life everlasting is the perfect vision of God, a most intense love, a fullness of knowing, a life therefore of endless praise. At the end of the *City of God* [XXII.xxx], Augustine writes, “There we shall be still and see, shall see and love, shall love and praise.” Everything you have ever desired, there it will be satisfied. We will be beyond the urgings and necessities of the body, things like food and sex, and yet the desires that now are expressed in those terms will in God be super-satisfied, lifted up to what they have always been really about.

And the reason for this is that God made man for himself. That is the distinctiveness of the human being over against all other animals and beings whatsoever. *We*, uniquely, were made for God. And as Saint Augustine put it memorably [at the beginning of his *Confessions*]: “Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” Only God will satisfy us, and God really will satisfy us. Life everlasting means, for those who enjoy it, that the Psalmist will have spoken absolute and concrete truth: “You [God] have given him his heart’s desire” [Ps 21:2]. God will give you your heart’s desire.

It is, finally, a perfect sharing in all goods. This will come about because each one will love his neighbor as himself. So there will be perfect communion, and each person will rejoice in the good of another as if it were his own good (which, in fact, it will be). In our current life, when one person gets a joy or a good of some kind, there can be a grudging acknowledgment of that—because it is his or hers, and not mine. With resurrected bodies in the life everlasting it will not be that way. Any person’s joy will be every person’s joy.

The final word of the creed is “Amen.” It is odd in a way to put “Amen” on the end of a creed. We don’t put “Amen” at the end of the pledge of allegiance; we just end it: “with liberty and justice for all.” We do put “Amen” at the end of prayers. But the Creed is not a prayer—it is not addressed to God; it is a gathering together of key, fundamental beliefs about God.

And yet it is like a pledge: it is, as Father Mead said in his first sermon, and often we have reiterated—it is a positioning of ourselves in relation to God. The Creed is not just a bunch of true statements. We don’t believe that God is Father, Son, Holy Spirit—or not that only; we believe *in* God, in Jesus who died and rose, in the Spirit who animates the church and will animate our bodies at the end. We believe *in*, as a posture of trust, an ongoing, lifelong relationship of trusting in, learning from, following, obeying, longing for, believing in *this* God. “Amen” means “may it be so.” May it indeed be so; may it be that we do believe in this God, the one and only God; may our bodies rise, and may we enjoy him for ever and ever.

And let the people say, AMEN.