

The Life of the world to come

Once again I have taken my title not from the Apostles Creed, which is the subject of the book by Nicholas Lash that some of us are reading, but from the Nicene Creed. There is no reason other than a snappier title. Christian talk about life after death is so commonplace that we fail to notice just how ridiculous it is. I choose the word carefully. Is life after death not simply a contradiction? As some philosophers like to observe, my death is not an event in my life. It is just a word we use to refer to the termination of certain biological processes which together we call life. "Life after death" is not, however, the language of the creed. That language is of life that is "everlasting", or "eternal" of life which belongs to a world yet to come. There is no mention of death, and neither should there be, because as Jesus reminds us, he is God not of the dead but of the living.

What then shall we say about this life yet to come? First of all, that we can know nothing certain about it. Everything that you and I know and understand depends on what we call this life. Life beyond this life sounds good, but means little. Descriptive talk which seeks to fill in its details is largely a waste of time. As Lash puts it, when we talk of the life everlasting we do so best by using language which wears its

metaphorical status on its sleeve, the fertile paradise language of the Bible, for example. However, following on from our agnosticism we ought secondly to remember that the statements of the creed are statements about the living God, and hence that to limit our notion of his life-giving to what we call life is to deny that creed when it claims God as the maker of heaven and earth, the source of all life.

The difficulty of discussing that which cannot be discussed is akin to a balancing act. No sooner do we say one thing than we have to be careful not to over balance and exclude something else. To say that God's life runs well beyond our earthly limitations is not to say, as many people suppose, that our true lives are something entirely spiritual, if by that we mean something immaterial. It is no part of Christian teaching that I am fundamentally something which can be separated from my body and continue to exist in the same way. I do not possess a body, I am a body. And for me to be alive after the thing which we call death, for me to live in the world to come which God creates, it must be me that lives; it must be my own self, body and soul, the stuff that you identify as this particular person. The idea of the dead floating around somewhere up there, looking down on us without eyes and listening to us without ears is not a Christian idea.

On the contrary, Christianity teaches a doctrine of resurrection. To say that I believe in the life of the world to come is, in one sense, to reaffirm what I have already said in the creed about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is to reaffirm that, and to emphasise that that resurrection has something to do with me, that the event of Jesus' rising to new life is not something which is simply about Jesus, but something which is about me as well, in fact about every human being. It is to say that the new life of Easter into which I am baptised is a life which does not answer to the limitations of mortality or the narrowness of our earthly vocabulary.

And lastly, notice that this new life is not simply about the end of things. In many ways, it's about the beginning of things, because the life of Christ was given to me in baptism, the very beginning of my Christian life. That event, for many of us so distant, is in fact the anticipation of our so called "life after death". There is life after death because there was life before death, the life of Christ in which I am clothed when my old self is put to death in the waters of baptism, the waters of the resurrection. The life of the world to come is also the life of the world today.