

I believe in the resurrection

Do you believe in the resurrection? Really? I mean, come on. Have a look at your own hands, feel the pulse in your own body. It is mortal. We are mortal. Do you honestly believe that when you die, somehow, somewhere – at some point in the future, a claxon will sound in heaven – and all the billions of men and women and children and babies whose bodies have long since decomposed into shadows and dust, will be reformed into human bodies?

I have to say, I do not find Christian arguments designed to prove the truth of the resurrection remotely convincing. But ... I find arguments by atheists designed to disprove the truth of the resurrection equally unconvincing.

And believe me, there have been times in my life when I have genuinely tried to unbelieve all this Christian stuff. And in moments like those, the big atheist baddies – Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Stephen Fry – can become appealing. Highly intelligent people, putting forward their arguments against Christianity and the existence of God and resurrection. And for such intelligent people, it frustrates me that their arguments against Christianity, delivered with such passion and articulated so cleverly, are so pathetically weak. For these contemporary saints of atheism, all I hear is their own emotional reaction to things they find uncomfortable.

So, it seems that – whether it is evangelical Christians putting forward their arguments for the existence of God, or whether it is rampant atheists, denying Christian truth claims – they are playing the same pointless game. Whether it is conservative Christians insisting on the reasonableness of the resurrection, or ultra-liberal Christians showing the unreasonableness of resurrection – it is the same game being played on the same field.

Trying to prove or disprove Christian truth claims, at the heart of which is the resurrection of Christ, trying to show that the resurrection is reasonable on the one hand, or unreasonable on other – it is playing the same silly game.

Whether it manifests itself in that detestable smugness that says “I have special access to truth because I believe in the resurrection,” or that equally detestable smugness that says “I’m too clever to believe in the resurrection,” it is the same pointless, silly game that is being played.

In all of these cases, God, Christianity, truth, resurrection – these things are being taken away from their context and based on something else. Whatever god may be proven or disproven by people playing these games – is a god based upon reason, rationality, logic. As though these things pre-exist God himself. And in recent centuries, we have come to believe unquestionably in silent, invisible, angelic/demonic forces of reason, and rationality and logic – as though these mighty forces themselves were unquestionable, and god must be measured by them.

And when we decide whether or not we are going to believe or disbelieve in God on the basis of these unquestionable, all-powerful, unassailable rules of reason – we are condemned to frustration even before we have begun. Why intelligent people get drawn into this game is utterly beyond me!

If the existence of God could be proven this way, it would have been done long ago. If it were simply a matter of using your brain to establish the existence of God – then all clever people in the world would accept it, and it would only be stupid people that don't. And after centuries of trying, Christians and Atheists alike still think you can carve the world up like this!

A plague on both your houses! And if you belong to either of those houses, the next question in your mind will be this: does that mean that belief is irrational? That you cannot use your brain, your judgement, your logic and reason and rationality when it comes to belief in God. You don't have to understand it, just believe it! Faith has nothing to do with your mind – it has nothing to do with logic and reason and rationality. People of a certain worldview cannot help but leapfrog to this conclusion.

Without realising that logic and reason and rationality come along late in the day. As often as not, when people appeal to these things as a basis for belief or unbelief – it is to justify beliefs already well established by factors that have nothing whatsoever to do with logic and reason and rationality.

When Jesus saw that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection – it had nothing, absolutely nothing – to do with whether or not they thought the physical act of raising someone from the dead was consistent with a mechanistic view of the universe. It was because, in Jesus' day as in ours, Resurrection meant revolution. Resurrection meant political upheaval – the great levelling force of change. And if you – like the Sadducees have grown wealthy and fat and comfortable off a political system that starves others even as it feeds you – the last thing you want is political revolution that levels the field. If you have your dream home and your dream family, and your loved ones are happy and comfortable – you will not believe in a resurrection which throws all of that into jeopardy.

Because resurrection – sure entails bodies being raised from the dead. But it was not an other-worldly belief – it was a new age to be ushered in, an age where – on the basis of the fact that God raises people from the dead – God brings new life to people here, and now. And people cannot have the benefits of justice and fairness here and now – without the political system having to change. And if you don't want the political system to change because it benefits you – what you are driven back to is 'I don't believe in the resurrection.'

So, the Sadducees only recognised as Scripture, not the psalms, not the prophets, not the histories of Israel. All of those things show that God is into revolution. Instead – they would only accept as Holy Scripture – the first five books of the bible, the law, the books of Moses. And what does Jesus do? Whenever he engages with the Sadducees he only does so using their own Scriptures – the book of Moses. And even here, on their own safe ground – he points out that God is a God of resurrection – the burning bush, which marks the greatest revolution in Israel's history – the Exodus.

For the Sadducees, there were personal and political reasons that made it necessary to deny the resurrection. And that is no less true today. Whatever logic, reason or rationality we may want to employ to affirm or deny the resurrection – there are prior reasons, personal and political, that shape our belief already. So in Scripture – no time is wasted trying to prove the existence of God, no time wasted trying to prove the resurrection. No one was ever argued into or out of the kingdom of God according to logic and reason and rationality.

Scripture gets to the personal and political basis of our beliefs rather than wasting time in pointless enlightened arguments treasured by privileged people. The question about resurrection that impinges on us today – is personal and political.

You could think of the banking reforms that never happened. It would take a courageous government to defy the financial tyrants who bankroll election campaigns. Rather the jeopardise your political future by reforming the banking system, you will instead seek to correct economic imbalances by taxing the powerless. And there are plenty of pressure groups who say this is exactly what is happening in Western politics. Leave the corrupt system intact, because to challenge it will affect us too much. Instead – tell everyone to tighten their belts, and make others pay for an unjust banking system. And right there – is the perfect example of what it means to deny the resurrection! Denying the life and justice and fairness for people, because it will cost me! And I don't care how many city bankers do an alpha course and repeat creeds – refusal to reform the banking system is precisely the basis of the Sadducean belief structure.

Or think of prison reform: Yesterday I heard a debate on Radio 4, held somewhere in Scotland. Where people were in uproar about prisoners being given the right to vote. And across the board, there seemed to be consensus, that prisoners do not have a right to vote! And European Human Rights legislation demands that we change that! So people are in uproar! Now – I find this baffling. Because the whole point of democracy is that human beings, regardless of their status, should have a say in how their country is ruled. And anyone who is denied their say, is effectively being treated as less than human! Prisoners – according to those who believe they should have no vote – are not human beings! Now that to me is an atrocity! And what made me laugh out loud is that – the next question in this debate was about the Tea Party movement in the States – a fake grass roots movement, that materialises into an ultra right wing political pressure group. And the response from Scottish politicians was again – almost consensus – “You wouldn't find enough people in Scotland with such bizarre right wing political beliefs!” After you've spent the last ten minutes denying that people in prison have no right to vote! To deny prisoners a vote is to deny people their humanity which is to deny resurrection – and all that the age of the resurrection entails.

Once again – Or think of our personal lives. The whole “Green wash” movement for instance: where we make token gestures of ecological commitment, whilst continuing in a carbon-hungry lifestyle. Recycling your bottles, turning lights off, leaving fridges closed – and then going on cruises and flying trips three times a year – it's no different to throwing loose change to help someone you've just stolen a thousand from! To live ecologically, will mean making actual sacrifices that threaten your comfortable habits – and when you refuse to change your comfortable lifestyle for the good of other people – you deny the resurrection.

We affirm the resurrection not when we sign up to an Alpha Course. Not when we recite a creed or state our belief.

We affirm resurrection not even when we engage in doing all manner of nice things for other people that somehow affirm us in precisely the way we want to be affirmed.

We affirm the resurrection when we say sorry to a real person whom we have misjudged.

We affirm the resurrection when we join Christian Aid demonstrations that push for economic and ecological fairness for all people.

We affirm the resurrection when we are on our hands and knees scrubbing up the mess that has been made by visitors to the church who have emptied their bowels into the foyer.

We affirm the resurrection when we instinctively sacrifice the bottle of wine in order to buy fairly traded goods.

We affirm the resurrection when we listen properly to another person instead of ramming our opinions and well meaning advice down their throat.

We affirm the resurrection by writing to our MP to demand justice.

But most importantly – we affirm the resurrection in and through all of these things – when we do them without consciously deciding to do them!

When we do these things because it doesn't occur to us not to do them.

When we do these things because the God of resurrection life is at work in our lives.

Whether or not we give our academic assent to the fact that God can put new life into dead bones – that has little to do with resurrection.

Whether or not we can tick the boxes of perceived orthodoxy – who cares.

Whether or not we believe in the God of Scripture – leave somebody else to worry about that!

Whatever we have to say about what we believe is of limited value in and of itself.

For us, to live the resurrection life is to be in living, dynamic relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ – the God who is not God of the dead, but of the living.