

Life after Death

The Second Coming of Christ - The resurrection of the dead

At first St Gregory of Nyssa teaches that when we speak of resurrection or coming back to life or renewal, and when we use many other names, we are speaking about the body which is subject to decay and not the soul, which, as being incorruptible, indestructible and immortal, is not going to be resurrected, because it does not die.

The resurrection of the body includes also the resurrection of all the members which for various reasons have been destroyed. On the day of resurrection even the part of a human body which thousands of years ago was eaten by carnivorous birds will be found “with nothing missing”. But even the members which the whales and sharks and all the sea creatures have eaten will be resurrected with the human being. The bodies which have been burnt by fire and eaten by worms in the tombs, and in general all the bodies which decay has destroyed, “will be yielded up by the earth whole and complete”. So all the missing limbs will be filled in and the human being will be presented whole. This means that we shall have our own body, which, however, will not be subject to decay and death.

This will happen in any case because it is connected with the creation of man by God. God did not form man for him to die, but death is the result and fruit of sin. And if the shepherd wants his flock to be healthy and almost immortal, if the cowherd wants to use various cures to increase his oxen, if the goatherd prays that his she-goats may bring forth twins, and all are aiming at something beneficial, God too has the same desire. It is plain from these examples that God wishes to reform “the ruined creature”.

In this homily of his which he delivered on Easter Day, referring to the Resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of bodies at the Second Coming of Christ, St Gregory of Nyssa affirms that without doubt there will be resurrection of the dead, that it is not impossible for God, and in addition he analyses the way in which it will happen. The things which St Gregory says are very important, and we shall set them out briefly.

The resurrection of the body is not an impossibility. For many reasons.

F i r s t. The God Who will raise the bodies is the same One Who created man out of earth. We regard the creation as given, says St Gregory, but if we think better we will see that it is something marvellous. Really, how the fine dust was concentrated and became flesh, and from the same material bones, skin, fat and hair came into being, that is to say, how, while it is one flesh, there appeared different members. He describes the different structure of each member of the body, since the lung is soft, the liver coarse and red, the heart a compact organ, and so forth.

Yet it is very strange that Eve came from a small part, Adam’s rib. How did the rib become a head, feet, hands, and so forth? The God Who created man in this way has the power to re-create him and to repair the limb of a decayed body. Moreover God Himself is the creator of both the first creation and of the second reordering. So it is a mark of the grateful and wise to trust in the things that God says and not to examine the ways and causes which go beyond their powers.

S e c o n d. The different examples which exist in nature show that God is all-powerful and that nothing is impossible and difficult for Him. God’s omnipotence appears in the variety and complexity of nature. The whole of nature loudly proclaims God’s grandeur and His power. The resurrections which Christ performed, such as that of Lazarus after four days, the son of the widow of Nain and the daughter of Jairus, show that it is also possible for Him to raise all men in the same way when He so wills. The sculptor who constructs one statue can construct others as well. Thus

Christ too, Who raised three people, can also do it to many others. Therefore the question of how the dead are restored to life is answered interrogatively: "How was Lazarus raised after four days?"

Not only the first creation but also what followed, what takes place in nature, displays the power and omnipotence of God. We know that man's birth is the fruit of God's action. By the grace of God a human being is conceived, held in the womb, born and grows. St Gregory of Nyssa says that the resurrection of the dead can be in the manner in which man is born. It is strange enough, according to human logic, how the sperm, which is formless at first, then acquires form, and the individual members of the human body are created. If a human being comes into being from the formless sperm, it is not at all inconsistent for the matter which is in the tombs, and which had a form, to be at once renewed in the old form, and for the dust to become a man again, as happened at the first creation.

Some people consider it improbable that bodies should rise again and that a human being should be completed after death, and they consider very natural the formation of the embryo and the development of the human being through natural birth. But if the second can happen, so can the first, since it is the same God Who brings about each of them.

He also takes the case of the potter who, when he has made beautiful objects out of clay following a certain process, someone enters his workshop and destroys them. But if the good potter wants to, he can correct what happened, making the same objects again, not inferior to what they were before. It is foolish for us to believe that the potter, who is such a small creation of God's power, can do such a thing, and not to believe that God can restore the dead.

The Apostle Paul uses the image of the grain of wheat which falls to the earth and dies and from it sprouts a great wheat plant. St Gregory adapts this image wonderfully. After thoroughly analysing what comes of this little grain of wheat and how many mysteries are hidden in it, he says that it is wonderful how a dry grain of wheat, when it rots performs a miracle, because it falls to the ground alone and sprouts a great number of grains. The renewal of man is easier than the renewal of the wheat. Through his resurrection man does not receive anything more than what he had.

The holy Fathers use many images from nature and present them to their flocks. We see this in many of their homilies, and in the homily of St Gregory which we are examining at this point. In order to show that it is possible to rise from the dead, he analyses very beautifully, realistically and representatively, with vivid colours and literary talent, how throughout the winter the trees are dry and at the beginning of spring they bear flowers and become a place where the birds gather, and people enjoy them. And the reptiles and the snakes too hide in the earth during their winter hibernation, and as soon as the suitable season comes and a stirring is heard echoing a sign of life, they leap up and start their activities. Just as the snakes wake up from their hibernation at the sound of this stirring of life, so also the dead bodies of men will receive their souls and be raised up when God's trumpet is heard.

He gives a wonderful description of man from birth to death. He observes that man's life is like that of the animals, it undergoes change and variation. A man, after his birth, successively grows, acquires various functions, and as he grows and reaches the end of his life he becomes a baby again who lisps, is silly and crawls on his hands and knees, as at the beginning of his life. All these things show that also before death man receives changes upon changes, fadings and renewals. This will naturally take place also at the time of the resurrection. Inasmuch as the perishable perishes by the law of decay, much more will it be renewed by the power and action of God.

But sleep too, which is necessary for our daily refreshing, and likewise our rising from sleep, point to the mystery of the resurrection of the dead. Moreover, sleep is an image of death and be-

ing awake is an image of resurrection. Many have characterised sleep as a brother of death, for in sleep man is like dead, unconscious. He does not recognise friends and enemies, he does not notice those who are around him, and that is why one can easily injure those who have been lulled to sleep. When a man wakes up, he gradually recovers his powers and it seems as if he has come to life. If there are changes and ecstasies in man during day and night, it is very foolish and contentious of us not to believe in the God Who promises “the final renewal”.

It appears from all these examples that the resurrection of the body is a very natural event. Just as we regard as a natural fact the birth of a man, the alternations in nature, the growth of plants and, in general, just as we regard as natural all the things that happen in nature, we should regard as another just as natural thing the renewal and re-creation of man, the resurrection of bodies. For the God Who did the former can do the latter.

T h i r d. The body is not completely destroyed after the soul leaves it. It is dissolved into “the things of which it was composed”, for it consists of four elements, water, air, fire and earth, but it does not vanish. In another chapter we saw the views of St Gregory of Nyssa, that although the soul is separated from the body, it remembers the elements and limbs of its body, is in touch with them and at the suitable time, by the power of God, will bring them together and the spiritual body will be composed. This shows that in spite of the separation of the soul from the body, the human being is not lost.

In this homily which we are studying, St Gregory of Nyssa says that the body does not disappear completely, but it is dissolved into the elements of which it was composed “and is in water and air and earth and fire”. The fact that the original elements stay and those things which come from them join them, after the body dissolves, shows that particular things are also preserved within the general. And when these four elements of which man is composed approach their prototypes, again too, while the prototypes remain, the particulars, the parts, also remain.

We know very well that the whole world was made from nothing, from non-existent matter. If it is easy for God to re-create something from nothing, it is easier to create from existing elements. Thus, since these prototypes exist, it is possible for God to form man again.

F o u r t h. St Gregory of Nyssa takes examples for the resurrection of bodies from the views of the men of his time. Many people considered and still consider it very natural for the features of bodies which have decomposed to go to their descendants and for features of bodies of those not related to be transmitted to other bodies, but they do not believe that it is possible for the same features to be renewed in those who once had them as their own. I shall quote what St Gregory of Nyssa said, because it is worth noting. He says that it is inconceivable “...not to acknowledge that what they possessed as distinctively their own will be renewed and brought back to life”.

Observing this passage, we can verify that at the resurrection of the body people will receive their own body with its special features, but nevertheless transformed. Since the body will be raised “in power and incorruption”, it means that it will not have on it the marks of decay, mortality and illness. Naturally, we do not know more details about this subject, but I think that what has been cited is very expressive.

F i f t h. St Gregory of Nyssa, however, insists strongly that the resurrection of bodies is necessary also for men to live a good life. For if death is the end of life, then the murderer, the adulterer, the one greedy for gain, the perjurer, the liar, and the merciless will increase in their evil. If there is no resurrection there is no judgment. If there is no judgment, then even the fear of God is lost and naturally where fear does not chastise, “there the devil dances with sin”.