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## ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE (III)

Since God is our Lover, not to love Him is to put ourselves away from Him, and to be apart from God is, precisely, Hell. Dives, the rich man, is in Hell, not because he was rich, but because of his hard heart. He has gone to the place his heart has led him. Jesus is pretty explicit about the tendency of great possessions to turn hearts to stone, but the evil is not in the possessions. Evil is never in objects. Evil lodges in the heart, which mortifies itself through its objects. It is yet another instance of what Plato understood and told us: the soul makes for herself a tomb out of her own body.

But the final thing in Jesus' parable, and the most profound and most profoundly shocking, is this: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe though one rose from the dead." Jesus invariably gives his stories something like this, something that places morality in its deepest religious setting.

On the one hand he says that we already know how we should act. We have the rule and the promise, the measure and the hope, Moses and the prophets. That is to say, we have the whole moral inheritance of the human race. This may not tell us exactly what to do each time, but it will tell us unequivocally how to act. It will tell us on what basis we must intend to live if we are to be authentically human. This knowledge is fundamentally inescapable. All over the world this is known, however differently it may be adumbrated. Confucius knew it; Buddha knew it; Socrates knew it. All sane human beings know it.

But when Jesus goes on to connect this form of life here and now with the resurrection to life eternal, then we have another dimension. For us this means that the deeds of the body, the acts of the flesh, mark us for eternity. If what we do here has meaning only for the moment, there may be a next moment in which I can undo the one preceding it – that is, until the final moment comes at death. If I'm bad at ten, I'll be good at eleven. But it does not work this way.

One of the deepest implications of belief in the resurrection of the body is that this world is of such great importance just because we are marked in it for the world to come. There is no more awesome fact about the appearance of the risen Christ than the print of the nails remaining in his hands and feet, and the wound torn in his side: "those dear tokens of his passion, still his dazzling body bears."

We have bodies, and what we do with them and through them in a

world filled with bodies – with material forms of every kind – is what makes possible for us whatever other life we may ever have. Failure to understand that is to miss not only the glory of heaven, but also the wonder and depth and risk and excitement of this world as well. If we take the other life away it robs this life of its power. Heaven makes earth important. Without the eternities the temporalities become trivial. The tens upon tens of millions murdered in this century are reduced to a sensational statistic. The material world is impotent to explain itself.

It is because of what we will be forever in the world to come that we must set love in order in this world. It is for what we will be hereafter that we must be as we should be in the present moment.

Finally, then, what is that? What do we know about what we should be and how we should act? It is not an abstraction. It is not the Golden Rule. It is not "love sweet love." It is not a plaintive "hoping for the best." It is not a Polonian platitude, "to thine own self be true."

It is the character of Jesus and communion with a Lord raised from the dead. This means remembering his life and coming into union with his spirit. It is not finding your identity or locating your image. It is recognizing the image of God in Christ and knowing that this is the image in which we are all made. To be as Christ, or, as St. Paul says, "to be found" in him, is to become one's true self at the same time.

Jesus gives us the grace to be as he is because he loves us. I remember once a friend of mine saying of the Lord: "There is a man in the world who loves me, and the love with which he loves me is the love that moves the sun and the other stars." The faith through which this grace works in us comes hard, and it remains unfortunately true that you and I, who profess to be Christians and therefore children of God and heirs of his divine Kingdom, still do not the truth, and still do not love, even though one has indeed been raised from the dead.

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**The Rev'd. William H. Ralston, Jr.**

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