

Death and Rebirth – J.G. Bennett, “Sunday Talks at Coombe Springs”

“Today I want to speak about the idea of resurrection of the body dying and being raised from the dead. It is a wonderful idea, but it seems to belong to another world than ours. It is possible to take it literally, and possible to take it some other way, but it is not usually taken as something concerning ourselves immediately- as a significant factor in our everyday lives.

In the form in which it appears in Christian doctrine it seems perhaps even more extraordinary than the bare notion of resurrection alone. The Death, Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ seems a unique event: so extraordinary and so incomprehensible that it seems to be something which we can only look at from afar, not something concerning us personally. Yet in reality, all great notions reproduce themselves again and again on all scales; so that if we cannot understand something on a very large scale, we may be able to see and understand it on a smaller scale nearer to our own experience.

Sometimes people have said, of course, that the very idea of death and resurrection is no more than the relic of an ancient fertility cult - celebrating springtime and the arising of the seed from its apparent death in the earth during winter time.

This kind of attitude is quite mistaken. I mean the either-or attitude that either death and resurrection is a sublime notion belonging to only theology and concerning God, or it is concerning Nature only, and just a way of representing to ourselves what we are seeing going on all about us in the spring. This is wrong. We are all part of one single manifestation. There is, in the way the world is made, a principle of dying and being born again which runs right through the whole process of the world. The world does not go continuously from a beginning towards an end but is constantly dying and constantly being renewed.

This constant dying and constant renewal takes place in us also, and we have to understand it most intimately in our own experience. Everyone who begins to study and know the transitoriness impermanence of their own inner states becomes well aware that our own experience is one of recurrent dying and rebirth. We lose ourselves. We disappear entirely from the scene into the mechanicalness of our own behavior.

Mind, body, feelings – all become dissolved into an automatism. And then, at a certain moment we awaken out of this. We become aware of ourselves again – aware of the world around us. And this awakening is truly a rebirth – a resurrection – as truly and completely representing this universal cosmic idea as the great things that are taught in religion or as what is going on around us all the time in Nature.

We do not have within us a principle of stable existence. What we find in ourselves, on the contrary, is a principle of renewal, of return, of being lost and found again. This principle we can only understand if we experience it in ourselves; and we know its taste as the taste of rebirth: whenever we come back from a state of oblivion, of forgetfulness. This happens over and over again, to such an extent that we become accustomed to it and cease to see how important it is – and really how wonderful it is – that we should be able to come back again after having been lost.

For it is nothing that we ourselves do. We become, as we say, psychologically “identified” – with our feelings, with our thoughts, with our activity – and we are lost. In that state of being lost, there is nothing that we can do to find ourselves. And then it happens!! We suddenly see that we are back

again and alive – seeing, feeling!! Something is there again in us that, a moment ago, was not there. Someone has come back who had gone astray or gone to sleep.

We might perhaps expect this awareness in ourselves of the return to also bring with it the awareness of the taste of dying, of what it is to lose. But I think everyone who has seriously tried to understand this process in themselves knows that we cannot be aware of the moment of losing – this moment when we disintegrate, lose possession of ourselves and just disappear into the automatism of our activity. For this is the moment of our nothingness, when there is no one there to see what is happening to us. We are not even alone because there is no one to be alone.

Out of this strange state, when there is nothing except a machine – thinking, talking, acting, behaving and nothing else – there appears awareness of oneself: “I am here”! It is truly a resurrection; a real rebirth.” This rebirth can be helped by a call; portrayed in the picture of the resurrection of the dead by the imagery of the “last trumpet” that sounds when the dead rise up. It is like that when “something happens” to us from the outside – or perhaps from within – and our inner dead state awakens.

We must not be frightened as we come to see this; although it is really a terrifying thing that we have no power to keep hold of our own life – of our own existence even – but that it has to be renewed and given back to us, from something that does not come from ourselves. In fact, most people are not frightened of it at all and never ask themselves the question: “What kind of existence is this that I have? Who can I be if most of the time I am absent or asleep?” Therefore, there is for them no sense of fear at losing oneself, nor wonder at finding oneself. Yet even when this begins to overwhelm us and we see the helplessness with which we fall into oblivion, at that very moment when we are most trying to hold onto ourselves – to our own presence – we must learn to trust that there is also something else that calls us back. And if it calls us back from this sleep that minute by minute overwhelms us during the day, and calls us back from sleep at night, then it will call us back too from the last sleep which we shall enter: The sleep of death.