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**Resurrection and Salvation in St. Maximus the Confessor**

My name is Matthew Fairhurst; I’m a doctoral candidate in the Divinity Faculty at the University of Cambridge. I spent last academic year working on St. Maximus the Confessor for a Master’s degree, thanks in no small part to the generosity of the Society in making a substantial contribution to the cost of the degree. I am extremely grateful to the Society for its support, and for the invitation to share a little of my research.

I have about ten minutes to make St. Maximus sound interesting to an audience who are intelligent and interested in Christian theology but probably not particularly familiar with his work. I think the best way to proceed will be to narrate my involvement with St. Maximus, and what I think he’s taught me.

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In 1 Corinthians 15, St. Paul writes:

*If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation is in vain and your faith is in vain… If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins.*

My question is simple: why? Why does the possibility of any of us being saved hinge on Jesus’ resurrection? This apparent connection between Jesus’ resurrection and our salvation had been perplexing me for some time when I first became interested in the Church Fathers. When I decided to undertake postgraduate research on St. Maximus, it was this issue that I brought to him, hoping that he might offer illumination.

To ask whether there is indeed a relationship between Jesus’ resurrection and our own might seem redundant; but in many theologies, the connection is underexamined. In the varieties of Protestantism in which I grew up, and which tend to predominate in university cities, I would argue that Jesus’ resurrection is not strictly necessary for our salvation. Jesus’ resurrection may be treated as a divine seal of approval on his Passion, or proof that his death was an adequate payment to God for God to be able to adopt a more positive attitude towards the humanity in which Jesus shares. Yet strictly speaking, Jesus could have lain dead in his tomb to this day and the mechanics of penal substitutionary atonement theories would still ‘work’. Such theologies therefore struggle to offer a robust treatment of the passage quoted above.

The second question that I had been nursing, and which converged with the first as I began to read St. Maximus, was: what is different about Jesus after the Resurrection? Why do people fail to recognise him? In fact, why can the Evangelists not even directly articulate what’s different about him? If the answer to the first question has something to do with the idea that what God does to Jesus in his resurrection prefigures what He will do to all of us one day, then this second question starts to become very interesting indeed.

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Little is known of Maximus’ early life, but he was probably born in the 580s A.D. somewhere near Constantinople. He was a high-ranking civil servant before becoming a monk; later in life, he became embroiled in public theological disputes about the nature of Jesus’ humanity, for which he was eventually tried, mutilated, and exiled by Emperor Constans II.

Maximus stands in the tradition of the earlier Greek Fathers, and of the Ecumenical Councils that had been convened in preceding centuries, especially the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Maximus’ basic framework for thinking about salvation is participation-in-God, or what we might call ‘*theosis*’. *Theosis* is a familiar theme in Patristic writings, and is often expressed in a formula similar to the following: the Son of God became human so that we might become divine (in a qualified sense!). The idea stems from Biblical texts such as 2 Peter 1:4, which speaks of “becom[ing] participants in the divine nature”; it was subsequently taken up by Irenaeus, Origen, the Cappadocian Fathers, and Athanasius, to name but a few.

Maximus inherits this notion of participation in God and elaborates on it with great imagination. For instance, in chapter 7 of his Ambigua, he envisages the consummation of all things at the end of time, when God’s beauty will be fully revealed and will draw all creatures to Him in perfect fulfilment of their natures. Everything in the universe will be suffused with God, he says, “as air is suffused with light”; and “the fullness of God [will] permeate them wholly as the soul permeates the body”. Once this happens, all corruptibility and deficiency will disappear from us, and we will become changeless and immortal. To begin with, then, we can with Maximus say that our salvation depends on Jesus because Jesus’ incarnation unites the divine and human natures, and so renews and perfects the human nature in which we all share. Jesus’ very incarnation is the point of union between God and humanity that makes theosis possible.

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So far so good: this is fairly standard Patristic theology. However, what occurred to me at this point in my research was that what I’ve said so far might actually raise more questions than it answers.

To return to my opening questions, what does the Resurrection have to do with any of this? Maximus seems to think – and certainly St. John of Damascus, in some ways Maximus’ systematiser, seems to read him this way – that the reinstitution and complete deification of Jesus’ human nature happens simply in the fact of the Incarnation, at the very point when the Blessed Virgin conceives. It isn’t happening gradually during his life, and it doesn’t only happen at or after the Resurrection.

Maximus does write, in the Ambigua, chapter 41, that Jesus “opened a clear way into paradise after his death”:

*Since there was for him no longer any difference between paradise and the world we inhabit, he again made this clear to his disciples when he was with them after his resurrection from the dead, showing that the world is one and is not divided in itself.*

Yet if anything, Maximus’ point in the chapter as a whole is that Jesus’ very existence – not specifically his resurrection – closes and heals the various levels of division in the universe, between the created and the uncreated, the spiritual and the physical, and so on. The importance of the Resurrection may be not that it changes Jesus’ human nature, but that it demonstrates that in him, our mode of existence (as created, physical, differentiated beings) and the heavenly way of being that Maximus calls ‘paradise’ already coexist.

This all led me to consider what sort of human nature Jesus had – did he assume a fallen human nature, or not? We don’t believe that he ever sinned, of course, but did he suffer sin’s effects? An interesting way to put it is this: would Jesus have died naturally if he hadn’t been murdered? Incidentally, I explored some modern theological commentary on this question and was surprised to find that there is little consensus, even within single traditions: modern Eastern Orthodox theologians, for instance, differ greatly in their answers.

In short, I believe that there is a divergence between those (like Aquinas, for example) who think that Jesus’ assumption of human nature means that he has to abide by a set of effectively pre-determined conditions which come with that nature – like passibility and dying – and those who think that Jesus changes human nature by his participation in it, i.e. that he changes the conditions of the human nature that he assumes. Although it is not entirely clear, I suspect that Maximus belongs to this latter category; in one place he specifically says that Jesus “is not subject to nature, but rather raises up nature to himself”. Again, John of Damascus reads Maximus this way, and says that Jesus only made himself subject to hunger, thirst, pain, physical wounding, etc. by specific acts of his will.

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Like Maximus in chapter 41 of his Ambigua, I’ve described a series of problems working from the ‘top’ downwards with increasing specificity. Now, as Maximus does, I will try to work my way back up through those problems using Jesus as the interpretive key!

The way that I extricated myself from this maze of Christological questions is as follows. It gradually dawned on me that it’s very easy to get fixated on ‘ontology’ – addicted to ‘substances’, so to speak. The Greek Fathers famously make use of, very broadly speaking, ‘Hellenistic philosophy’, which tends to be interested in natures, substances, forms, and so on; the Fathers take these kinds of terms and use them in theological contexts, often in innovative ways. Maximus’ particular legacy largely consists in his terminological precision about certain Greek words like *physis* (nature), *energeia* (energy), *hypostasis* (person, or existence), and *thelema* (will). His insistence on particular understandings of such terms contributed both to his being mutilated and exiled, and to his eventual vindication and commemoration as a great defender of Chalcedonian Christology. However, as I came to realise, this legacy should not obscure what I would describe as the ‘teleological dynamism’ in Maximus’ vision. Maximus is not using terms like ‘nature’ in an abstract, static sense; natures only have any meaning at all insofar as they are realised in specific existences.

Maximus’ great contribution to early Christology is his insistence that the Incarnation does not diminish human nature, and that Jesus’ human nature is therefore endowed with exactly the same basic faculties as any other – *and that he uses them fully and correctly*. It’s important not just that Jesus has a human will, as Maximus insists, but that he exercises it fully and in complete accordance with God through every constituent part of a complete human life, even to the moment of death. Consequently, Gethsemane is critical to Maximus. He confesses that Jesus’ human will is already ‘completely deified’ by the time he finds himself in Gethsemane; in this sense, Jesus’ accord with the Father’s will in his prayer does not ‘achieve’ the deification of his human nature. However, the actual active exercise of his human will in that moment still has salvific power insofar as it contributes towards the establishment of a concrete human existence – namely Jesus’ life, taken in its entirety – which is at every moment in perfect accordance with the divine will.

When Jesus dies, for the first time in the history of the world, a human being has lived their entire life in perfect harmony with God’s will and so fulfilled the basic purpose of their human nature – because for Maximus, to accord with God is the ultimate fulfilment and perfection of every human faculty. It is Jesus’ perfect and divine active fulfilment of human nature through the living of an entire human life from start to finish that transforms human nature; and it is this in which we participate. We participate not in a static, abstract nature, but in an active, lived, and continuing existence, namely Jesus’ existence.

Now, I believe, the causal link with Resurrection starts to emerge. To be a Christian – in fact, for Maximus, simply to be a human being – is to participate not in an abstract ‘human nature’ but in the specific existence of the one truly and fully human being, Jesus. We must necessarily be resurrected because we share in the concrete details of Jesus’ existence, which encompasses his resurrection. In short, when St. Paul talks about our participation in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, he is not using pious waffle or drawing a metaphorical link between something that the Father did to Jesus and something that might happen to us one day; rather, he really means what he says!

As for the apparent change in Jesus after his Resurrection, I think that we can speak of his ‘mode’ of existence as having changed without his human nature having done so. There is of course something of an unspeakable mystery about the matter, hence the Evangelists’ enigmatic accounts; but my sense is that it has something to do with death being necessary in order to be saved. There may be things that we must lose and can only lose through death; death may be not just a gateway to union with God, but perhaps the only one. Maximus makes a comment on 1 Corinthians 15:51, saying that we will in fact all die at the Second Coming, even if we’re present when it happens (since the Greek verb in the verse, *koimaomai*, literally means ‘sleep’, so perhaps has the figurative sense of being dead specifically for quite some time). In isolation, this seems an odd point for Maximus to stress, but I wonder if it’s because he has an intuition to this effect – that death is necessary before we can be saved.

Two things remain for me to say. Firstly, I commend Maximus to you; he has become far more readily available in English translation even in the past decade, and if you get the opportunity to read a little of his work then I encourage you to do so. Secondly, let me reiterate my gratitude to the Society for its kind support, which has enabled me to complete my Master’s degree and begin doctoral studies. I hope that the Trustees will be gratified to see something of the fruits of their generosity.