

The reality of death is shown not just in figures presented daily by the WHO but by the huge make-shift morgues as well as the mass graves all over the world. It is rather depressing, isn't it? Personally, it was looming large ever since I have known to have prostate cancer. But the Gospel reminds us we are called not only to take up our cross to follow Christ, but to die with him. That is the vocation to which we are sacramentally sealed in baptism. Dying with Christ is, by definition, not the last word of the Gospel. For if death is not ordered towards rising with Christ, it is not dying with Christ.

Today's Epistle reading in Romans 6 provides us a much profound understanding of death. Nothing triumphant in what Paul says about death but in the midst of death we live in hope of entering eternal life.

In Romans 6.1-14 we can recognize four different senses in which Christians die with Christ and, corresponding to them, four different senses in which we are raised up with Christ.

First: we died to sin *in God's sight*, when Christ died on the cross for us. This is a matter of God's decision. His decision to take our sins upon Himself in the person of His dear Son may be said to be tantamount to a decision to see us as having died in Christ's death. Similarly we may be said to have been raised up in His resurrection on the third day, since His resurrection was, according to God's merciful will, for us. We may call this the juridical sense of death.

Second: we died to sin, and were raised up, in the baptism, which was at the same time both our ratification of our own acceptance of God's decision on our behalf (to regard Christ's death for our sins as our death and His risen life as our life) and also God's bestowal of His seal and pledge of the fact that His decision really concerned us individually, personally. We may call this the baptismal sense of death.

Third: we are called, and have been given the freedom, to die daily and hourly to sin by the mortification of our sinful natures, and to rise daily and hourly to newness of life in obedience to God. This we may call the moral sense of death.

Fourth: we will die to sin finally and irreversibly when we actually die, and will - equally finally and irreversibly - at Christ's coming be raised up to the resurrection life. This is the end-time sense of death.

Since in each case we have to do with both (a) a dying with Christ (it is also a dying to sin) and also (b) a being raised with him, let us explore the four senses of rising with Christ.

The first sense: we died with Christ on the first Good Friday. God's decision to take our sin upon himself in the person of his own dear Son involved the decision to see Christ's death as died 'for us' and to see us as having died in his death (5.8). As far as our status with God is concerned, he has chosen to relegate our sinful life to the past. It is in this sense that Paul refers to himself and the Roman Christians in v.2 as 'We who died to sin' and in v.8 argues from the fact of our having died with Christ.

Romans 6.1-14 clearly does not say expressly that Paul and the Roman Christians were raised with Christ on the first Easter morning in God's sight; but vs.11 & 13 seem to point strongly in this direction. In v.11, Paul is exhorting the Roman Christians to recognize the truth that they themselves are 'dead to sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus'. That is the truth of the Gospel about them. God wills to see them as having died in Christ's death and having been raised in his resurrection. In v.13 the words 'as alive from the dead' underline the fact that it is a resurrection that is in mind and make it clear that Paul does think that the people he is addressing have already been raised from the dead in some sense.

The second sense in which we may be said to die with Christ is the baptismal. Vs.3 & 4a indicate that our baptism is intimately connected with our relationship to Christ's death. We were baptized into his death; through our baptism we were buried with him into death. But it is clear that Paul did not think of baptism as actually effecting this death with Christ. Baptism does not establish the relationship. It attests a relationship already established. For Paul, baptism, which, as the act of the person baptized, is the outward ratification of the human decision of faith. It is, as God's act, the sign and seal and pledge that the benefits of Christ's death for all people really do apply to this individual person in particular. Our baptism is God's confirmation, God's guarantee, of the fact that Christ's death was for us, that God sees us as having died in his death.

Nowhere in Romans 6.1-14 is it said explicitly that those whom Paul is addressing have been raised with Christ in baptism; but it is surely implied. Paul has spoken of their having been baptized into Christ's death; but, if baptism were only the seal of their interest in his death and not also the seal of their interest in his resurrection, it would be of but little value, for Christ's death has no saving efficacy apart from its sequel in his resurrection. We may say, Paul does not mention this explicitly in order to avoid triumphalism.

Again, it is not expressly said in this passage that Christians have to seek to die daily and hourly to sin – the third sense of our dying with Christ. But it is clearly implied. The question in v.2 'We who died to sin, how shall we any longer live therein?' is a recognition that, instead of continuing to live in sin, we must try to die to it. V.6 implies we must strive constantly to die to sin. In v.11 Paul

exhorts the Roman Christians to reckon with the fact that they have already died to sin in God's sight; in God's merciful decision about them, he surely intends them to draw the conclusion that they must now try to die to sin in their actual living. In vs.12 and 13 Paul tells them to stop allowing sin to reign unopposed in their moral selves in such a way that they obey the self's desires and to stop placing their members at sin's disposal as tools of unrighteousness.

The truth that Christians must constantly try to allow themselves to be raised with Christ in their day to day living is most plainly expressed in v.4, in which the clause, 'as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father' indicates that the moral conduct denoted by 'walk in newness of life' is being regarded as a resurrection. 'Walk' is often used by Paul to denote a person's conduct: in our concrete daily living we are to be conformed to Christ's resurrection. V.8 should also be taken to refer to a Christian's conduct, though it is possible that the thought of the end time fulfillment of the life already begun may also be present.

Lastly, there is, I think no reference in Romans 6.1-14 to the fact that we shall finally die to sin. But this is the one item in our four senses which is unquestionably obvious without being stated. It was doubtless as obvious to Paul as it is to us.

It is possible that the thought of our resurrection with Christ in the fourth and last sense (that of our being raised in the final resurrection) is present as a secondary reference in v.8b (conceivably in 5b) as well as the thought of our resurrection in the moral sense. Paul has already mentioned eternal life in 5.21 and later in 6.22 and 23. That eternal life, to which the final resurrection is the entrance.

What does all this dying and rising to do with our daily living? Paul exhorts us not to belittle the significance of that newness of life, to which God has certainly called us, however bad we may be at responding to his call. This passage of Romans 6 should encourage us to recognize that some light from Christ's resurrection falls on our direction of obedience which is all we have to show, however weak our obedience may be. But we must not be mistaken to think of the faint signs of newness of life as the end-time glory. We have not entered eternal life yet. Otherwise we will lose a very vital dimension of hope in our daily walk with God. But at the same time we must not fail to remember that the fact that Christ himself has already been raised from the dead has a significant bearing on our present life.

*Fr Ernest Chau: Third Sunday in Trinity 28 June 2020*

Whether pandemic or personal illness, I hope these four different senses of death and the corresponding four senses of rising with Christ provides us the proper perspective of living and dying.

*When we've been there ten thousand years*

*Bright shining as the sun,*

*We've no less days to sing God's praise*

*Than when we've first begun. Amen.*