

# DEATH TO DEATH

Canadian Lutheran, 2004

"I too will die!" I still remember that day when that truth first struck me powerfully. It was at the funeral of a friend's mother who had died of cancer in her mid fifties. It was then, for the first time, I realised that at some point in the future my body would lie in a coffin and be buried in a grave.

I knew, of course, long before then, that one day I would die. But my own death was an abstraction, something so unreal and remote it had no bearing on my life as a university student. I lived as if I were immortal. I had not yet envisaged my own death in any real way. At that funeral the sense of my own mortality first invaded my imagination and it has pervaded it ever since.

On the same day, the good news of the resurrection of the body first gripped my conscience and quickened my imagination. And I began living in a new way after that funeral. My sense of morality heightened my awareness of how precious and unique each moment was. And each person! It was as if I had begun to see the physical world in colour for the first time, rather than just in black and white. The sky had never been so blue and the trees so green. Each person, and the face of each person, was so different and wonderful and lovely. Everything mattered as never before.

Yet that was not all! Since my own mortality was connected with the message of the resurrection of the body, the face and the body of each person, each plant and every physical thing around me, and the sky itself, gave me a glimpse, an inkling, of the glory to come. This glory would not just arise from more of the same world, without anything bad in it, like cancer or death, the perfection of what I had thus far experienced. No! It was as if a whole new world had suddenly – and secretly – opened up before me, a wonderful world that lay hidden behind the trappings of daily reality and poised to transfigure it with radiance and life, energy and exuberance and utter joy. It was then I first realised what Paul was getting at in 1 Corinthians 15:54 when he exclaimed: "Death is swallowed up in victory." From then on I began to see both death and life in a new way, as if with new eyes – spiritually rather than just physically. Death became far

more terrible than it had ever been, and life became much more wonderful, richer than ever before. And the bodily resurrection of Jesus, His strange victory over death, became the be-all and end-all for me.

### **The deadliness of death**

We too easily underestimate the magnitude of Christ's resurrection – its range and power – because we underrate the power of death, its grip on us and its hold on our world; and we belittle the spiritual damage done by that terrible robber and tyrant. This is so because death is regarded almost entirely as a biological phenomenon. We therefore view death as a single, physical event, the end of bodily life here on earth. Death, then, is something that happens to us when our hearts stop beating and our brain shuts down completely. It is always lying out there, in front of us, as an alien power, waiting to ambush us, like an accident we can avoid if we take sufficient care of ourselves.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg, the last stage of something that already has begun within us. Death is already an established fact for us. This is true biologically, for we begin dying as soon as we are born. Our obsolescence and mortality are built genetically into us. Since each cell in our bodies dies after its short life, we now have no cells we had seven years ago. Our body ages by itself apart from the stress of living and the ravages of sickness.

Our dying goes deeper than the process of ageing. It affects our souls, for people can be mentally and emotionally dead even while still physically alive. Although this may surface most dramatically in the guise of mental sickness, it, to some extent, attacks us all. We all die a thousand little deaths, emotionally, from all the knock backs and setbacks we suffer. Disappointed and damaged, we join the ranks of the living dead, people who eke out diminished lives because they have lost the capacity for living and loving, sharing and enjoyment, ghostly souls whose hearts are dead long before they actually die.

Yet the grip of death reaches even deeper into us than that, for apart from Christ we are all spiritually extinct, dead as dodos. In fact, we were born with dead spirits, people who, as Paul says, were dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). So death does not just lie before us; it is at home within us, taking the place God's

Spirit was meant to occupy and reigning there in us. We begin our earthly existence physically alive, but spiritually dead. And, as we exist apart from the living God, death uses guilt and shame, fear and anxiety, anger and ill will, bitterness and resentment, to rob us of our limited physical and mental vitality. That's why we all hanker after life as if we were somehow deprived of the best of it, its plenitude and abundance. We keep looking for someone, or something, to enliven us; we envy those who seem to have more vitality than us, and we latch on to them to borrow life from them. And we become more and more desperate as we feel death eating away at us and doing its deadly work inside us

### **Death's undoing**

Christ became a human being to undo death by his own death and resurrection (2 Tim 1:10). he died to destroy the power of death; by his own death He reversed our life cycle and drew us into his, so that we could have eternal life before death – and after death too! By his bodily resurrection he transformed that old life-gobbler into our death-gobbler. (1 Cor 15:50-55). He turned it against itself – and inside out – by using death to undo its deadly grip on us. For those who trust in him, death has lost its sting for it no longer marks the end of living but the end of dying. By his own death and resurrection Christ has changed our living and dying.

First, through baptism the risen Lord Jesus reverses our old life cycle (Rom 6:3-11). Before we die physically he puts our old sinful self to death for us, so we can share in his resurrection. He does not merely resuscitate us physically, like Lazarus, or give us superhuman life that still ends in death; he gives us something far better than that, his own life, eternal life, the divine life he has as God's Son. And so we have eternal life, now, well before our physical death. We have been raised with Christ from spiritual death; our dead spirits have been revived by the Holy Spirit. We are no longer haunted by the fear of death, but filled with life.

Since we believe in Christ we have already passed from death to life (John 5:24). So, in one sense, our death lies behind us – dead, buried and undone with Christ in our baptism. Now only life lies before us, abundant life, more and more of it! We still lose our physical and mental vitality as we age, but as we live with Christ here on earth we gain in spiritual vitality. No matter how much life we have

received, the best is yet to come. The fullness of bodily life with God and each other is still before us when our mortal bodies are swallowed up by life, not death (2 Cor. 5:4).

Second, Christ does not completely abolish death as a physical event. Instead, he uses it to end our dying and undo the sin that is its cause. Just as he overcame death by his resurrection, so he uses our physical death to transform us and our bodies into his likeness, like ugly caterpillars into lovely butterflies (1 Cor 15:35-49). As long as we still live here on planet Earth he puts our old selves and our sin-damaged bodies to death, bit by bit, so they may receive the life of God. That process of physical mortification ends with our physical death. Only then will our physical dying be over. Then we will be ready for the fullness of life with our resurrected bodies in the heavenly world God has prepared for our enjoyment.

We do not pass through life to death, but through death to life. Christ summed this up rather succinctly in his wonderful promise to Martha in John 11:25-26: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

There is life even in death for those who believe in him. And even better than that, there is no death but only life for those who live in him. What could be better than that! That's why, in the Lord's Supper during the Easter season, we praise God the Father for the glorious resurrection of his Son, who 'by his death has destroyed death, and by his rising has restored life.'