

Two kinds of dying

John 12:20-33

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²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. ²⁷ "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-- 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰ Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

My students in Theology are not surprised when I tell them that I'm not there simply to teach the Christian faith from the outside, as if they were going to be learning about Christianity the same way that they could learn about Islam, or Hinduism, or Native American religions. They're not surprised because they have come to learn in a Faculty of Theology in a Christian university. And in spite of all of our failures to do so well, the students who come to us know that they're going to be studying Theology with professors who believe that Christian faith not only matters but who also believe that it is the right way to look at all of reality.

That's the reason that we get not only many students who want to study Theology full-time but also many students who come to us from the University of Ottawa or Carleton and who want help making sense of the courses that they're taking there. They want to learn more about their faith and that want guidance to think and speak intelligently about their faith in their profession.

But, they're usually not prepared for what they find. That's especially the case in my classes on Matthew, Mark or Luke, or Paul's letters, or, like today, John's Gospel, when they hear me say that the good news that the whole New Testament teaches starts with this: Jesus taught his disciples that they needed to die. And that's what he teaches still today.

Now, we get many students who come to study Theology from Health Sciences at University of Ottawa. When they hear me say that the Jesus taught that his disciples needed to die and still do, they're very puzzled at first. These are students who are studying in one of the most in-demand professions in Canada because as Statistics Canada reports: the number one concern of Canadians is not terrorism, or global warming, or gender issues, but health care and making sure that it's always available to Canadians. For these students their whole life is going to be about giving Canadians what they want most: saving and preserving life. Yes, they know that everyone, including their patients, has to die some day, but, not now. We'll do everything we can to preserve life at all costs. Yet, they cannot escape the fact that in the New Testament Jesus will tell his disciples: if anyone wants to follow me and be my disciple, he or she is going to have to take up his own cross and follow me.

In fact, some of my students who have read more broadly start out by thinking that what Jesus is doing is what Socrates did when he taught his students almost 400 years before Jesus. Socrates summed up his philosophy by saying that it was about learning how to die. What Socrates meant was this: it is only by thinking very seriously about what life is about that we are able to say at the end of our life, at the point of death, that we have lived a good life.

In fact, this is probably what the Greeks who came to Philip and asked to see Jesus thought they would see by asking to see Jesus. Having been formed in a culture that prided itself on having such a great hero like Socrates, they probably hoped to see a man who was getting ready to die, a man like Socrates, calm and composed, on his death bed ready to drink the hemlock. That's very likely what they were looking for as Greeks, the next Socrates.

There is a lot of truth in Socrates's wisdom. And the Greeks who sought Jesus weren't far from the truth. But, Jesus is not Socrates, and Christian faith is not Philosophy. Philosophy is about learning how to live a good life so that when you come to the end of your life, you have no regrets. But Christian faith actually turns Socrates's teaching and Philosophy on its head and says:

you cannot live a good life unless you die first.

And this is what my students have to get over. Because philosophy, like health care and most science, talks about one kind of death: the natural death of the human person that occurs at the end of a natural human life. That death may occur early or it may occur late, but it is the end of the human body. But, Christian faith talks about two deaths. Yes, it realizes that bodies die. But, Jesus spoke about another kind of death, one that matters much more, a death which we experience when we die with Him and begin truly to live. When we die with Christ, symbolized in baptism, we are raised to a new life in Christ. In that new life, God's Spirit enables us to live in a way that we would otherwise never be able to live and during which that same Holy Spirit continues to purify us from the stuff of death that still clings to us and keeps us looking backwards at what used to be. That's why Paul had to tell the Colossians, who had died with Christ and been raised with him, not to keep looking backwards at a life to which they had died: "if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³ for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Colossians 3:1-3) You cannot live that life until you die.

Now, clearly neither you nor I nor my health care professionals in my classes can ignore the fact that our natural human life will end. Our bodies will die. And at that moment our Christian hope will provide the comfort that we need. The very first Lord's Day question of the Heidelberg Catechism, a question and answer that I know that you know so well, says it clearly:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong— body and soul, in life and in death— to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

This is beautifully expressed.

But if you stop at the first part of that answer it only gets you to focus on the first form of death, our earthly death, something that the whole New Testament says is not to be feared, even if it's something that most Canadians fear and want to avoid at all costs and if at all possible.

No, the Catechism goes on to say that in Christ's death you have already died. "He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil." I now "belong to him. The "Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him."

And you see: that's what matters. We belong to Christ because we have died to sin. We were "buried with him by baptism into death". Our "old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed". In other words, we are not people who are simply waiting around, counting the days, until our physical bodies to die in order to enjoy life in Christ. We are already living "for him" now as the Catechism says precisely because "we have died with Christ".

And what does that life in Christ look like. Well, again, the Heidelberg Catechism says it beautifully, again echoing Paul (Question 43 for those who are interested). It's a life in which "the evil desires of the flesh ... no longer reign in us", a life in which "we may offer ourselves to him as a sacrifice of thankfulness".

That's exactly right. As Jesus himself tells Philip and Andrew in today's reading: "when I die" and am "lifted up from the earth", I will "all people to myself" and they will share in my death, be raised to new life, and be able to live a life of thankfulness. That's to be our life: not one that looks forward and sees death, that shudders and shakes when it thinks about death, that does everything possible to avoid death, but rather we are those who have died and have already been raised to a new life that will never end.

That's the reason that we don't have to live a life of gradual decay, of decline, and of greater and greater sadness as we face the loss of all that we have known. This is why we can live lives of thankfulness because it is no longer I who live, no longer I who will one day die. This is why we can live lives that are characterized by joy, and gentleness, and justice, and service... all the things that we just prayed for! These should be the natural characteristics of the person who has already died and been raised with Christ.

But, here's what we used to call the \$64,000 question: is that your kind of life? Have you died with Christ? If so, have you been living a new life characterized by thanksgiving? Or are you living your life with a view to earthly death, doing everything you can to avoid it, or at least keeping it at bay for as long as you can?

There's a pretty sure way that you and anyone around you can answer that question. Just ask yourself or ask your neighbour: how will people remember me when I die? Will they remember me first of all as someone did everything possible to avoid death and to cling to life? Someone whose life was characterized by fear, by hoarding up treasures on earth, by anger and frustration at the decaying world around you? Or will they remember me for my thankfulness, my joy, my gentleness, my humility, my constant service? These are the things that characterize the lives of those who have died already with Christ and will never die again and be separated from the love of God.

This is what the Greeks would have seen in Jesus. Not a new Socrates. But one who would give new life to all those who died to the world in him.

I don't know if they saw that. Even Philip and Andrew didn't see that until much later. Because when it came time for Jesus to die, none of the disciples, save the one who wrote the words of the Gospel of John, stayed around. All they could think of was themselves. Even Philip and Andrew, who had been with Jesus from the beginning, abandoned him. They could only see with the eyes of their body and fear for their own deaths. The ruler of this world had blinded them. In fact, they wouldn't see until they were baptized by God's Holy Spirit into Christ's death. Only then would they have their feeble human life, and all of their petty, human hopes and fears, taken from them and replaced with new life in Christ, a life that would never succumb to death. Only then would they go on to be the disciples of Jesus, known for their thankfulness, their generosity, their humility, and their willingness to be killed for their faith because they knew that they had already died. Only then would these apostles preach the word to the whole world.

And that's what I want my students to be, too. Disciples of Jesus, saints, known for the gifts of God that are made possible in the new life in Christ. Because there is no reason that you and I cannot be those who are fully alive in Christ. There is no reason why people around us shouldn't be able to see us not as someone who is getting older in time, and who will eventually die, someone who, yes, will be comforted by the words of eternal life when we die, but rather as those who already shine with the light of God like the very "sons of light" even if our bodies are gradually or more quickly decaying. Remember Jesus's words to Philip and Andrew: 'If you cling to your life [in this world] you will lose it, but if you have already died to your old life in this world you will keep your new life for all of eternity.' Those who have lost their earthly lives by dying with Christ are those who will leave behind them a trail of thanksgiving, of joy, of generosity, for all to remember. Just like the saints. Just like Billy Graham who said about his own death: "Someday you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. I shall be more alive than I am now. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God." He could say that because his death at 99 was not the one that mattered. What mattered was his death with Christ and a new life in which he became one of the greatest proclaimers of the good news of God's Word that the world has ever known.

Today might be just the occasion that you have been waiting for to be released from the death that haunts so many people. Today might be the day in which you go forth from here not just as someone getting older, waiting to die, consumed by aches and pains and suffering and decay. Today might just be the occasion you have been waiting for to hear that in Christ you have already died and already been buried, not in your own tomb but in His! And all you need is to hear the word of good news pronounced from up here in His name: You have been set free! Now, go! Live the fullness of life that He has won for you! Go! Live thankfully, joyfully, gently, with humility. And know this: when you do, that's how people will remember you when you are no longer physically around. Because there will be lots of eyes following you as you begin to live this joyful new life. People who ask: 'How is it possible that he's so happy? He's no different from me!' Pray that God might open those blinded eyes to see that you are very different. Pray that they might see something more than your decaying body and the clothes that you wear that are going to decay even faster ... pray that God will help them to see you and me as someone so fully alive in Christ that they will never forget what they've seen and want it for themselves, so that they, too, can die and start to really live.

Let us pray.