

Life In The Midst Of Death

Charles E. Raynal, III

First Presbyterian Church, Hammond, Louisiana

Death is life's greatest question. That we who once came to be will one day die is a fearful mystery, the consequences of which are too terrible for ordinary personal resources. To face our own death and the death of loved ones is the most stringent personal test of Christian faith. The question for individuals is whether or not life is finally meaningful, whether the end of human life fulfills or betrays what is most distinctively human. We preachers should not minimize death's horror by easy appeal to some inevitable component of the universal grief process nor acquiesce in the mortician's thin cosmetic disguises of its ugliness. Before the limitation that God places on the span of our life, we shall be afraid.

Yet death is not simply personal. It takes a peculiar guise in today's world as a mark of our fallen age. Examples of death as social policy are not difficult to find. Elective abortion has become a routine means of birth control, and though it is clearly wrong for the government to bind the conscience or deny equal treatment to the poor, it may be more deeply wrong for any of us to obscure this violence against helpless human life by aseptic technique. Capital punishment is a mark of the brutality of our society. Its efficacy in deterring violent crime is unproven, and it has been so inequitably administered that it perpetuates more injustice than it punishes. World hunger is a vast and complex phenomenon whose root causes are embedded deeply in the gap between the rich and the poor. Keeping and torturing political prisoners, like Steven Biko, the South African moderate whose death in prison still remains unexplained, or like the thousands of other cases documented by Amnesty International, are symptomatic of the use of the threat of death as a means of oppression. The memory of Vietnam, a war for which our leaders could give no justification finally believable by the American people, much less by the rest of the world, brings death as social policy squarely home. Our neutron bomb, which preserves property while slowly killing personnel, is but one of the most recently publicized refinements of the horrible ingenuity of modern warfare. Our arms trade is turning the whole world into armed camps among which the probability of nuclear war increases. Though death is particular, even so it is the wages of the sins of our life together and the reminder of the sickness of our human condition. Death as an instrument of social policy has a new face in our time, and its power over our communities is more vast than we are accustomed to acknowledging.

For the Church, the question of death must be raised and answered in the light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from death on the cross. The resurrection is the unique and pervasive testimony of the earliest preaching and teaching of the Church. There is no discernible level of tradition within the canonical New Testament for which the resurrection is not essential. Apart from the rising of Jesus from the dead on the third day, there would have been no Lord's Day nor any remembered gospel to preach. Without it there would be no grounds for hope before the personal dilemma death poses nor any reason for boldness before

the brutality of death as social policy. The resurrection is essential as the basis for the Easter gospel. It is essential for any real candor in the face of death's destruction of individual personality. It is essential for any hope in the presence of the new face of death as social policy.

I

Paul identifies Jesus for the Church as follows:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (I Corinthians 15:3-5, RSV.)

Soon after he was converted, Paul received this already traditional formulation of the first faith of the Christian community.¹ Its sequence of Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, and appearances is presupposed by all the other writings of the New Testament. Even those in Corinth who oppose Paul's theology of the resurrection do not deny that Jesus was raised on the third day (See I Cor. 15:12-18). The rest of this chapter is the most deliberate and the richest exposition of the implications of faith in the resurrection in the apostle's writings.² Its difficulty is token of its depth, and even though our minds are forever falling short of Paul's own, his words may well renew our preaching of the Easter gospel.

As for Paul, so with contemporary Christians: faith begins in the recognition and acknowledgement that God raised up Jesus from death on the cross. If we ask "Who is Jesus?" the answer must be "He is the crucified and risen Lord." If there were no resurrection there can now be no faith or forgiveness: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (v. 17). However, given this unique happening, this unexpected surprise, the Christian Church affirms a personal, individual hope even though we die. Offered this unasked for grace, Christian faith affirms life over against every appearance of the new face of death as social policy. There need no longer be any cover-up of death's power over human good. Nor need we fear that God's best intention for our well being will be foiled. In the resurrection of Jesus we see that God's characteristic activity is to rescue His people from the grip of death.

II

The resurrection is essential for a personal hope in the face of death. Hans Conzelmann has argued that in I Corinthians 15 Paul was writing to "spirit enthusiasts" who believed that the personal implications of Christianity were "for this life only."³ Instead Paul argues that there is an analogy between what God did in raising Christ from death on the cross and what God will do for "those who belong to Christ." Like a seed that must disappear to become a plant, the human self must die in order to be transformed into a new self.

Dr. Elizabeth Kuebler-Ross and others have exposed how our society often seeks to cover up the ugliness of death.⁴ Elderly people are confined to nursing homes and so the difficulties of aging and the pain of dying are frequently borne

in relative isolation. The death of a patient is identified with personal failure by many physicians. The terminally ill are too much isolated and their thoughts of dying remain unexpressed because neither medical professionals or families are able to face the inevitability of death. The artifices of the "funeral home" (Who lives there?) are readily apparent to any preacher whose pastoral duties ally him with morticians: the make-up and wax, the neutralized "all faiths" chapel, the tremulous tape-recorded music, the pretentious flowers, the artificial turf over the grave.

Against the conspiracy of silence or outright denial, Christian faith recognizes death as real and as the most telling consequence of the corruption, the ignominy, and the weakness of human existence. Christian faith does not deny or seek to cover up the sorrow and loss that death represents in human experience. Nor does it affirm an easy out with "pie in the sky by and by." Christian faith faces the mortality of the human person.

Whence this power to face the awesome reality of death? The affirmation of the Apostles' Creed, "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting," is a faithful rendering of Paul's theology of the resurrection. "The resurrection of the body" means "the resurrection of the human self," and though the phrase is not itself Pauline, it nonetheless reflects his thought. In traditional forms of Christian affirmation, the immortality of the soul, held to be a spiritual substance within the body, is the warrant for the life everlasting. The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, for example, teaches that the soul is an "immortal subsistence" within a body which turns to dust (See Chapter XXXIV). In Paul's thought, however, immortality and incorruptibility are not attributes that signify the continuity of the self through death. They are rather the deathless perfections of those whom God raises from the dead. The life everlasting represents a radical change that comes as a result of the victory of Christ, not as the natural endowment of the human person. That the resurrection of the self is a gift, however, does not undermine Paul's supposition that there is continuity beyond death for the person. Embodiment is essential to selfhood for Paul, and therefore signifies continuity in the resurrection. Of course neither is this continuity subsistent within the self, but is rather given by God in a manner appropriate to the new condition of life in the resurrection. Paul calls it a "spiritual body" (v. 44) and implies that the change from the self which dies to the new self given by God is a regeneration and a fulfillment of the old self.

Therefore the resurrection means that facing death, we nonetheless find the promise that our death is not our end. As God vindicated the righteousness of Christ by raising him from the dead, so we may count on him to forgive our unrighteousness and preserve our identity as his children. We are given no details of the life everlasting nor should we pretend that our faith or knowledge is sufficient to cover all our anxiety. Yet in Christian faith we have "the comfort of a reasonable religious and holy hope"³ that God will complete what we cannot complete for ourselves and sustain us through our dying.

III

In the third place, the resurrection of Christ is essential as the basis for justice in the human community. According to Paul, the power of death is

destroyed by the fulfillment of the purposes of God in his coming kingdom (vv. 20-28). As risen, Christ is the first fruits of a new and universal order: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (v. 22).

As the resurrection is the basis for personal courage in facing one's own death, so it is the ground for the Church's witness to the injustices that are perpetuated in the human community. There is no individual resurrection apart from the context of the larger purpose of God for his whole kingdom. Faith is not an opiate, dulling the Church's sensitivity to the pain of the impoverished world, muffling its cries for justice. Just as the resurrection of Jesus is God's chosen way to make right the injustice and loss that his death on the cross represents, so is the resurrection the necessary condition for the Christian hope that the suffering of the world will find respite in God's coming kingdom. Juergen Moltmann has said of Christ raised from death on the cross: "In that man the future of the new world of life has already gained power over this unredeemed world of death and has condemned it to become a world that passes away."⁶ As the affirmation of the vindication of God's victory over death, the resurrection is the indicative upon which rest all the imperatives of the Christian ethic. Rather than being a hindrance to concern for the problems of human community, the resurrection is the only basis for a realistic social ethic.

Finally, injustice manifests itself in death. Death may be latent—such as in the relatively higher rate of infant mortality among American blacks. Death or the threat of death may be patent—as in the systematic oppression of apartheid in South Africa or the suppression of dissent in Brazil and Soviet Russia. Death makes our forgetfulness of social justice insidious. For Christian faith the power of death everywhere manifest in today's world is possible only as the denial of God's righteous rule. It is the defiant brutalization of life which is God's gift, the betrayal of the preciousness of every human person.

Therefore the resurrection is not an escape from the urgency of justice but rather the only adequate basis for the Christian ethic. The resurrection of the crucified Jesus is God's vindication of the righteousness of the kingdom he preached. It is the only assurance that an ethic of love is a reasonable course for human community. The assurance is not that justice will be achieved by human endeavor. Jesus preached the coming of the Kingdom of God and ended up on a cross. Likewise, should we take up the struggle of God's coming Kingdom, we may find defeat. But the resurrection stands as the sign that what we cannot make right, God will finally accomplish for His people.

Thus Paul's conclusion from the resurrection is an admonition:

be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (v. 58).

¹ Hans Conzelmann, "On the Analysis of the Confessional Formula in I Corinthians 15:3-5," trans. by Mathias Rissi, *Interpretation* XX, 15-25. See also Reginald H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 9-49; Jean Hering, *The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. by A.W. Heathcote and P. J. Allcock (London: The Epworth Press, 1962); C. F. D. Moule, editor, *The Significance of the Message of the Resurrection for Faith in Jesus Christ* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1968).

² H.W. Boers, "Apocalyptic Eschatology in I Corinthians 15," *Interpretation* XXI, 50-65. Boers'

structural analysis is very helpful. His conclusion that "Paul is lost to us if we attempt to make his message speak to our time" (p. 64) is unsatisfactory.

³ Conzelmann, p.24.

⁴ Elizabeth Kuebler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

⁵ *The Book of Common Worship* (Philadelphia, The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1946), p.207.

⁶ Juergen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York, Harper and Row, 1974), p. 171.