

## **Dying to Live The Role of Death in Life and Becoming Human**

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The Christian Gospel, that by his death Christ trampled down death, bestowing life to those in the tombs, speaks to each and every age. Nothing is more important than this proclamation; but, I want to suggest, nothing is more difficult today, for our understanding of the relationship between life and death has changed fundamentally over the past century.

What I have in mind is this: very few people today (in the West) actually see death. We know that people die, and we see their bodies. But compared to the situation a century ago, there is a marked difference. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most people would have had one or more of their siblings die during their childhood, and one or more parent dying before they reached adulthood. Deceased siblings, parents, friends, and neighbours would have been kept at home, in the parlour, being mourned and waked by friends and neighbours, washed and prepared for burial, until being taken from home to church, where they would be commended to God and interred in the earth. However, today, in a very real sense, we no longer *see* death: we don't live with it, as an ever-present reality, as has every generation of human beings before us. There was been much discussion, in the latter part of the last century, of our "denial of death." But it would seem to me that the problem is deeper and more difficult.

If it is true that Christ shows us *what* it is to be God in the *way* that he dies as a human being, then, quite simply, if we no longer "see" death, we no longer see the face of God. By death, which expresses all the weakness and the impotence of our human nature – that whatever we do, we will die – by this, and nothing less, Christ shows us what it is to be God, for his strength is made perfect precisely in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). This gospel message—that by his death Christ has destroyed death, so granting us life and delivering us, not from death itself, importantly, but "from the fear of death" (Heb. 2:15)—has to be the starting point for our reflections on the role of death in the spiritual life, as it is for all theology.

In doing so, we must be aware of a transformation in perspective that is necessary to reach a genuinely theological perspective. This transformation is similar to the transition from the Synoptic Gospels to that of John. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the disciples do not really understand who Christ is until after the Passion; and so they run in fear at his crucifixion. Only subsequently, when the risen Christ opens the Scriptures so that they could recognize him in the breaking of the bread, do they then understand how Moses and all the prophets could speak of how the Christ must suffer to enter into his glory (cf. Luke 24).

### **Human Mortality**

The first thing we can see is that death is, in fact, tragic. This is, of course, a natural reaction. Yet why it should be so, and not simply a neutral fact, is really only understood in the light of Christ. Prior to the coming of Christ, there was no real sense in the Old Testament that death itself is tragic. Yet, now, however, in light of Christ's victory over death, death is now revealed to be "the last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26). Only now can we understand that men and women don't simply die as a neutral, biological fact; they die by having turned away from their Creator, their only source of life. However, if we take our reflection one step further, in the light of Christ, we can see that just as the Passion of Christ is the starting point for understanding the tragic dimension of death, so, too, it is the starting point for understanding the overarching work of God. And in so doing, without minimizing the tragedy of death, Christ has opened up a way of seeing a deeper mystery in death. In fact he has transformed death throughout all time, for what was once the end, now becomes the beginning.

## **Baptismal Death as Birth into Spiritual Life: From breath to Spirit**

What this transformation and beginning is, is indicated by St Maximus in some very striking words. Christ, as St Maximus put it, has “changed the use of death.” Through death, Christ has provided, says Maximus: “another beginning and a second birth for human nature, which through the vehicle of suffering, ends in the pleasure of the life to come.” Through his Passion, destroying death by death, Christ has enabled us to *use* our death, the fact of our mortality, *actively*. Despite our knowledge of our own mortality, or rather because of it, we are tempted to hold on to this “life” as we know it, to do whatever we can to secure it, to live it as mine for as long as I can perpetuate it. It is not so much death itself, but rather the “fear of death”, as the Letter to the Hebrews put it, that has held us “in life-long bondage” (Heb. 2:15). Because of this fear of death, we do all that we can to preserve our lives.

But, through the work of Christ, the gospel demonstrates to us that life comes through death: it is “to those in the tombs” that Christ gives life. If we don’t live for ourselves, trying to create our own mortality, if, rather, we learn even now to take up the cross, to die to ourselves and to live for Christ, his Gospel and for others, then the very life that we begin to live, even now, is eternal—it cannot be touched by death, for we have entered into it through death.

## **Bodily Death and Creation**

Through our death we learn, finally, the true nature of our weakness, and so, simultaneously come to know the power of God made perfect in weakness. We stop trying to “create” ourselves, and instead become clay in the hands of the creator, clay which he fashions into flesh, with a fleshly heart (now that our hearts of stone have been broken down), to become a living human being, the being which St Irenaeus calls as “the glory of God.

## **Two Witnesses**

Two early witnesses (St Ignatius of Antioch and Blandina – a young slave girl martyred in Lyons around 177AD) to the reality that the life of Christ comes through death might help us gain further insight into this mystery of a Christian death.

## **Take Back Death**

If it is true, as I suggested earlier, that Christ shows us what it is to be God in the way that he dies as a human being, then, if we don’t see death, we will not see the face of God either. If this is true, then the abandoning of the traditional funeral liturgy, means that indeed we no longer “see” death. This is, in my view, the biggest change in human existence in history and also our greatest challenge today. I would suggest, then, that our task today is not just to proclaim our faith in an increasing secular world; it is, rather, to *take back death!* We can do this by allowing death to be “seen,” by honouring those dying with the full liturgy of death. We can do this by being clear in our theology, as St Irenaeus was in describing the martyrdom of Blandina, so enabling others to see the amazing work of God effected through death. And we can do so, by ourselves bearing witness to a life that comes through death, a life that can no longer be touched by death, a life that comes by taking up the cross. Our most urgent task today is, therefore, to regain the martyric reality of what it means to bear Christian witness.