

1-31-2023 - When you are dying, Christ is your life

Do you remember that children's nursery-rhyme game called "Ring around the Rosy"? You joined hands with your friends and moved around a circle, chanting the words:

Ring around the rosy

Pockets full of posy

Ashes! Ashes!

We all fall down.

At the last line, the goal was to see who could fall down first. You certainly didn't want to be the last one standing. As far as we knew when we were children, these lines were harmless nonsense. Like all classic nursery rhymes, their exact meaning lies buried under generations of folklore. But some speculate the game originated during the Middle Ages, mocking some deadly plague. A rose-colored ring on the skin was the first infection symptom; small posies of flowers and herbs were thought to ward off death. And ashes and falling down? The grim final outcome of the disease.

It may seem morbid to our enlightened generation that children back then would make death into child's play. But I think our reaction would say more about our world than theirs. We hold death at arm's length, avoiding the topic as much as possible.

In contrast, the Scriptures speak frequently about death. And yet we Christians too easily embrace our culture's unhealthy phobia when it comes to death. We're embarrassed to mention it. We've taken to adopting the periphrases of our day to get around death and dying. We treat dead bodies as empty receptacles to be discarded. We speak of the dead as the "departed." We like to call funerals "celebrations of life". We prefer cremation to in-ground burial. Obviously, as Legionnaires and Veterans, we have a much different view, with Honors to be rendered and our "Families" to look out for. But follow me hear as much of the rest of the world see it.

We should be cautious about this, however. Many customs exist when it comes to burial practices, and some have valid reasons for cremation. Grieving is personal, and we shouldn't make pronouncements where God hasn't given us directives. But we also need to talk more frequently and candidly about foundational Christian beliefs about death.

Basically speaking, death is an enemy. It's an outrageous intrusion into God's perfect creation. God forbade our first parents from accessing Eden's tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). But eat they did and die they did. They and their children after them and so on down to this very day, each succeeding

generation in turn succumbs to the consequences of that first and original sin from which all other sins flow.

Death is most certainly not child's play. Death is neither to be scrupulously avoided or casually embraced. People speak about "death with dignity" without acknowledging that death is the ultimate indignation – a division between body and soul, the separation of breath from flesh.

But that separation is not permanent. That's what I mean to stress – I want to get you ready to die. **Does that shock you?** I assure you; I mean no disrespect. Throughout the centuries the church has always had a healthy respect for dying people. And truth is, we're all dying.

From the youngest newborn to the eldest nursing-home patient, we're all in the process of dying. Preparing for death is part of Christian living. Our ancestors in the faith were concerned that fellow believers be prepared for what they called a "blessed death" – falling asleep in faith in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection unto eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

While we need to find consolation and comfort in Christ of every calamity that comes our way, our ultimate need for consolation and comfort in him is when we come to the end of life. And then, the spotlight is continually on Christ Jesus. He remains the Way, the Truth, and the Life both in life and death. "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's (Romans 14:8).

As our brother in the human flesh, Jesus has already conquered death. His physical body was the instrument of our salvation. In skin and bones like ours, he bore our sin. He suffered excruciating agony of body and soul upon his cross. Three days later his resurrection was the culmination of our redemption, but it all began with his crucifixion. Like bookends, they encapsulate the whole package of our deliverance: death and resurrection, cross and empty tomb. Because he emerged victorious from his grave and conquered death, we will too.

In flesh and blood like ours, Jesus destroyed death and ransacked hell. His human body was the bait that Satan swallowed at Calvary, plotting to destroy God's anointed. But, Jesus' divine nature was the hook that destroyed the devil and robbed him of all his power, delivering us from bondage to sin, death, and hell.

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. (Hebrews 2:14-15)

Jesus defeated death by his own death. Satan sought to be the devourer, but he ended up being the one devoured – because God cannot die. As God, Jesus is life, and so death has no power over him. Jesus – who is both God and man – suffered and died and rose again in his human body. With his flesh and blood intact, he destroyed death and made captivity captive.

The waters of baptism join Christians to Jesus' cross and resurrection, by which he won victory over death and hell. "We are buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

The life is now yours. Having died with Christ in baptism, you also live with him. And you can count on that life in Christ to sustain you every single day of your life. That includes days of darkness and pain as well as days of sunshine and happiness.

In a very real way, having been baptized into Christ, you have put on Christ. You live in him, and he in you. Paul writes: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

That changes everything for the Christian facing death. Baptized into Christ's death, you have already gotten death out of the way. You might say the grave has been defanged. All of death's power to destroy has already been annihilated by Jesus' death and resurrection. As Jesus rested in his tomb for three days before his glorious rising on Easter Day, so the Christian falls asleep in this world only to be raised with all the saints with body and soul intact in eternal glory.

Our hope remains consistently rooted in Christ and his sure word through good times and bad. Christ Jesus holds us safe throughout. In times of joy and peace, in times of suffering and pain, in time of distress and catastrophe, our security rests in Jesus' blood and righteousness. He is the solid rock; all else in life is sinking sand. Commend yourself always into his care – you've got nothing to lose and everything to gain. You can say with Paul: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). This doesn't change the fact that death is a fearful prospect. But remember: you are baptized into Christ, and so you have already died, as far as sin and death are concerned. You have only life to look forward to – here and now, every day you live on earth, and hereafter in heaven's joyful peace.

To help us get ready, we have a dress rehearsal every night as we lie down to sleep in anticipation of rising in the morning.

Teach me to live that I may dread the grave as little as my bed.

Teach me to die that so I may Rise glorious at the awful day.

Dark nights and deep valleys go with the territory in this world of sin.

Long days of suffering and plenty of anxious fear be in store for you. But there are better days ahead. A whole eternity of glory, in fact: "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).

One of the things people fear most about death is the prospect of dying alone. But if you are a Christian, know this" Christ Jesus, who bore your sin and carried your sorrows in his own body into death and buried them in his tomb, now lives forever in risen glory. Because he died and was raised again, he has removed the sting of death and brought life and immortality to light for all the faithful.

On the day you die, I guarantee you won't be alone in that day and hour. Jesus will be there to guide you through the perils of death and the grave into bright courts of heaven's glory, where he already lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever.