

Easter Day
17/4/2022

Mark the Evangelist

1 Corinthians 15:19-26
Luke 24:1-12

Death, taxes and resurrection life

In a sentence:

Resurrection life is a life of eyes-opened love for each other

In 1789, Benjamin Franklin wrote to Jean-Baptiste Le Roy concerning progress on the new Constitution for the United States:

Our new Constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency; but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.

(In fact, Franklin's observation was probably drawn from an earlier source). That last part has entered into conventional wisdom: nothing in life is certain but death and taxes.

Christian confession adds to this sardonic observation the following: while we might think death and taxes to be two things, *we live as if they were one*. For this to be clear, we must see that taxes have to do with our responsibilities to each other, the claims we make on each other, and it is these which place death-like limitations on what we can be or do. In her full moral claim on us, the other person is our limit, our end, and so our death. Death and taxes – our end and our moral accountability – *coincide*.

This might seem a strange place to begin our reflections on Easter Day, when we might expect to hear a clear word about *resurrection*. Yet, surely, a clear word about resurrection requires a clear word about death. If resurrection is somehow an “answer” to death, we have to get death right for that answer to be worth hearing.

Today's reading from Paul comes from his great “resurrection chapter”, perhaps a strange place to look for ideas about death. On a surface reading, Paul seems to be arguing the case for the resurrection of Jesus, and our resurrection with it. I suspect, however, that what is really at stake is the timing and meaning of death. The pointer to this “hidden agenda” is that the Corinthians seem to have believed in resurrection already. Theirs was a richly blessed church:

^{1.5} ...for in every way you have been enriched in [Christ Jesus], in speech and knowledge of every kind...⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Corinthians had a strong sense that the kingdom had come, that they had been set free from the bondage of death. And yet, they jostled each other for priority in the community, took each other to court, were confused about obligations in marriage, argued about rights against responsibilities, and overlooked the needs of the materially and spiritually poor in their midst. It's worth remarking that this letter contains two of Paul's best-known passages: his teaching on the mutuality of church members with its notion of the church as Christ's unified Body, and his “love” chapter, most favoured at weddings and funerals. As communal and love-oriented as these chapters are, we have them precisely because of the *absence* of the loving mutual responsibility they describe.

To recall where we began, we could characterise the Corinthians as having given up on “taxes”. Resurrection life is, for them, the overcoming of that death which is the limitation of self in responsibility for each other. Death is here social obligation: the constraints the bodies and needs of others place on us. The poor person makes a claim against our use of resources, the indigenous person against our colonising intent. The Israeli makes a claim on the Palestinian and vice-versa. The refugee makes a claim on an economic system they’ve not (yet) contributed to. Being present to us in this way, *the other threatens to be the death of us*.

The Corinthian church saw this sense of death overcome in what was effectively a decision not to see the presence and needs of others. Resurrection – life in freedom – is here *a closing of our eyes*. Their exclusion of the poor from the Lord’s table was a closing of their eyes; rejecting the spiritual objections of the weaker believers among them was a closing of their eyes. Closer to home, “terra nullius” was a closing of eyes. “Haven’t got time” is a closing of eyes. “Just a woman” is a closing of eyes. They and we overcome death’s claim on us and so are *resurrected* in this way: sweeping aside what feels like deathly obligation by closing our eyes.

If this is what has been happening in Corinth, then Paul’s “resurrection chapter” is strangely out of place if all he wants to do is to assert and defend the resurrection of Jesus (and our own). But, given what the Corinthians understood resurrection language to imply for their “common” life, Paul’s recurring phrase – “raised from the dead – should likely be read with the emphasis not on “raised” but on “dead”. His concern here is not, first, resurrection, for this is accepted if misunderstood. His concern is instead with the *when* and the *meaning* of *death*, and his message to the Corinthians is, you still have some serious dying to do.

For the Corinthians, to be dead is to *see* and feel the claims of others, and to be risen is no longer to need to see the other, no longer to have to “pay taxes” (so to speak), no longer to have real responsibilities towards each other. Their life together reflects this – for they do not see each other properly – and they think this to be resurrection. Here it becomes clear that an interest in death and resurrection is no mere “religious” infatuation but has deep moral consequences.

And so Paul insists on an entirely different sense for death and resurrection: to be dead is not to *see* but no longer *to be seen*. Death is “the last enemy” which “hides” us from each other and, in a way, from God. The death of Jesus is not that, like the Corinthians, he closed his eyes to us but that we closed our eyes to him. He is cast out, relegated to the worthless, a stone the builders rejected.

And so, for Paul, to be resurrected is to be seen again. When the church confesses that Jesus is risen from the dead, it says that God refuses to let us keep our eyes closed to Jesus. Perhaps it is not for nothing that Paul favours the word “appeared” rather than “raised”, in his apparently traditional account of Easter:

...Christ died ... ⁴and ... was buried, and ... was raised on the third day ..., ⁵ ... [and] he *appeared* to [Peter], then to the twelve. ⁶Then he *appeared* to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he *appeared* to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he *appeared* also to me...

To be raised from the dead is to be seen again.

Death is not seeing and feeling the imperative to act morally, as the Corinthians seemed to think and rejected. Death is closing our eyes and ears. Death is declaring Sovereign Borders so as not to see, and keeping detention centres out of public view. Death is

covering our ears to the painful claims of indigenous peoples on the beneficiaries of colonisation.

In such decisions, Paul asserts, we mistake the means of death as the means of life. And so, again, we see how theories of death and resurrection are no mere religious additions to otherwise secular life. Affirmations of death and resurrection are active all around us. With the commencement of election season, we have entered into 5 or 6 weeks of sound-bite sermons about what should or should not be seen, what will or will not be raised to life.

Christian talk about resurrection has to do with the opening of our eyes to see each other, and the extent to which we are ourselves *seen*.

We are not good at this. We don't see well, and so we are poor lovers. We need constant reminding that we are mutually-sustaining members of a common body, that only love finally endures. For now, we see only as if through a glass darkly, and so our testimony to the resurrection is itself dark and blurry. The last enemy – the death which darkens our vision – is not fully overcome for us. But when it is, we will see as God sees us: clearly, face-to-face. Heaven is being seen in all that we are and need and can be, and resurrection life is seeing ourselves seen.

To confess that Christ has been glimpsed in resurrection is to expect that we also will rise, scales fallen from our eyes. In the meantime, faith is learning to open our eyes – learning to see and love – and heaven begins to take shape among us.

To misquote Charles Wesley, for an interpretation of the verse of the last hymn we will sing today:

Soar we now where Christ has led,
following our exalted Head;
made like him, *with open eyes*:
ours the cross, the grave, the skies.

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