

“Ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” (the Epistle).

Easter is nothing if not extreme. “Death and life have contended in that combat stupendous; the Prince of Life, who died, reigns immortal” says an old hymn, and Mel Gibson's film of the Passion (if anyone remembers it) probably underplayed the savagery of the Lord's death. The death was brutal and total, but the Father restored the Lord to life. That is not just some trivial recovery from a “near-death experience”, not even like the raising of Lazarus, who still had a human death to die; Christ is brought beyond death to a new life.

The message for us is equally extreme. Not simply: “the Resurrection shows that Christ has been vindicated, so his teaching has authority and you must follow it.” That pattern of argument is to be found in the New Testament, but it is not the whole truth and it leaves out the hardest part: how do we get the strength to follow it?

No, St. Paul is indeed extreme. “You died” is a better translation. He assumes adult baptism, of course, but any baptism is “a death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness” as the Catechism puts it. This is the sense in which Christians are different from the rest of humanity; not that they are necessarily better people, or even that they believe in God, but that they have passed through death to a new life in which “our citizenship is in heaven”.

“You died”, and so the old life is over. All that is left is tidying up. For us who were baptised as infants it is important that we accepted that baptism and its obligations “a death unto sin” in confirmation, and that we remain faithful. But not in our own strength; you died, and so you are alive with a new life, and that new life is summed up very simply: Christ himself, “risen, ascended, glorified” is our life.

“Your life is hid with Christ in God.” Yes, it is hidden from the world, because they cannot understand us and the source of our life. So they imagine all sorts of absurdities about us.

Hidden means not just concealed from the world, but carefully looked after (treasured indeed) in what Jewish speculation called the “Treasury of souls” in God's keeping. If it is our destiny to reign with Christ for ever, this is how he already values us. But this truth is hidden at present; it is in the time to come that Christ will show himself to the world for what he is, and “then shall ye also appear with him in glory.” Easter emphasises the Christian hope: “heirs, through hope, of thy everlasting kingdom”.

You died, says St. Paul, and so “mortify” (the word is better translated “kill”, for we are still in the extremity of the new life) not just some bodily vices (however much some who call themselves Christians are determined to forget that duty) but much more that overwhelming spiritual error “covetousness, which is idolatry”. Kill that awful error which is Mammon, man's possessiveness, the system by which the secular world conducts its affairs, putting greed in place of God. We must kill that error in ourselves, for the devil will always try to reintroduce it; but this is not to deny God's good creation, for which we give thanks.

If Lent has been, all too sadly, a time for the recognition of our sin and mourning for it, now is the time for change. Kill off the old; “put on the new man” (as it says just after the passage we read). The newly baptised in the early church wore white (newly washed and clean) garments for a week as an image of this change, and that is why white is the liturgical colour for this season. Put on the new man, for as the first creation was good before it was spoilt by sin, so will be our new creation in Christ.

“Finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee.
Changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place
Till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise.”