

From Death to Life

見沼 MJCF April 9, 2023

Matthew 28:1-10, Romans 6:5-11

Each year at Easter, I'm reminded that the power of Jesus' resurrection is only made significant when we recognise his death on the cross. Without Good Friday, Easter Sunday loses much of its joy. In a similar way, when we do not realise the depth of our own sin, it is more difficult for us to sense the joy of being loved and forgiven by God.

At the online candlelight Good Friday service the other day, we read the story of Jesus' last days before being crucified, starting in the garden of Gethsemane with his struggle to accept the way God was leading. As the story went on, through Jesus' arrest, the trial and the crucifixion, we extinguished candles one by one. This represented how Jesus' disciples were scattered, and he was finally left alone to face the horror of being tortured and nailed to a cross.

During the weeks leading up to today's Easter celebration, I have tried to get deeper into the understanding of our own sin and how that is connected with Jesus' dying on a cross. Also in my personal times of prayer, I read devotional materials which helped to bring me closer to understanding the suffering of Jesus, but I struggled to identify with those who crucified Jesus. I cannot imagine myself nailing another human being to a cross. Yes, I understand that we all have sin, and in certain circumstances, we could end up doing terrible things, even kill another person. I can imagine this, but it's hard to put myself into the same place as the people who would torture and kill someone. Then, I read a devotional on Jesus' words from the cross. In his excruciating pain, he calls out to God, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (in Luke 23:34) And then, it hit me...I can identify with this! It's tough to imagine myself intentionally killing someone, but I know that I often "don't know what I'm doing". I know that I often hurt other people when I've focused on myself rather than on truly listening. Sometimes, I've hurt others through a careless word. Good intentions are important, but, good intentions are also affected by sin. In fact, most people who hurt others, even intentionally, have some sort of an answer that makes sense for them, as to why they do it. I'm reminded of people who do terrible things during wars, and then say, "I was just following orders." Sometimes there are fears that they'd be killed if they didn't follow orders.

We may not know what we are doing – how terribly we sometimes behave toward other people. All of us can fall short of God's perfect will, even though we may have good intentions. For this, we need the grace and forgiveness made available through Jesus Christ.

In Luke 23 there's the story of the two criminals who were crucified with Jesus, one on either side of him. The one mocks Jesus, but the other has a different attitude. He says they are getting punishment because they had done wrong, but Jesus was innocent. Then, he asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. Jesus then tells him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." All the criminal did was to humbly turn to Jesus and recognise him for who he was. He didn't need to get baptised, or say any big confession. It's mainly an attitude of the heart and a decision to humbly follow Christ's leading.

The power of being made alive in Christ loses energy if we haven't acknowledged our own sin. We need to realise that through Jesus we are made dead to sin. In John 12:24, Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." If we just try to just add Christ to our lives we only receive a hint of being truly alive in Christ. It's only when we let go of our old life, and put Christ in the driver's seat, so to speak, that we can truly experience new life in Christ. On one hand, it is incredibly tough to let go of ourselves and let our old self-centred person be nailed to the cross with Christ. On the other hand, all it takes is a humble step of faith.

The story of Easter is a well-known one. In fact, among Christians, Jesus' death and resurrection is at the centre of our faith. Because Jesus took our sin, died on the cross and was raised to life, we are invited to recognise that we are now dead to sin and alive in Christ. Sin no longer reigns in us, and

instead we gain new life in a relationship with our Saviour Jesus Christ. In the book of Romans, Paul contrasts “sin and death” with “Christ and being made alive.” As Christ died and conquered death by being made alive again, we also follow in his footsteps as we let go and allow ourselves to be, in a sense, crucified with Christ. We are no longer ruled by sin and the fear of punishment. Instead, we are now dead to sin, and alive to Christ as Paul states in Romans 6:11.

What does it mean to be made alive in Christ? In the Bible, two different words used to describe life are “bios” and “zoe”. “Bios” means being alive as a physical body (not dead). In the story of the resurrection, Jesus was no longer dead. He was alive and appeared to the women at the tomb, and to many disciples... When Matthew writes that the women take hold of his feet, he emphasises that Jesus had been physically raised to life. He had a body, and wasn’t just a ghost floating around. But, when Paul talks about how we are made alive in Christ, the word used is related to the other word for life, “zoe.” “Zoe” means “life in all its fullness.” This is the kind of life that we are raised to in Jesus. It doesn’t just mean that we live longer (as in the bios meaning). It’s an abundant life, a new life without fear, a life that recognizes that God is indeed in control and stronger than death. It’s a life that recognises that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Christ now lives in us. We now live by faith in Christ, the Son of God. We are dead to sin. Sin no longer rules us. We still are influenced by the power of sin, but our entire life now belongs to God. Whenever we do fall short because of sin’s influence, the Spirit of Christ makes us aware, and we have an opportunity to repent. Let us rejoice in the resurrected Lord who has conquered death. In place of a prayer I’d like to read Psalm 16:7-11.

I bless the Lord, who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me. I keep the Lord always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.
Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol
or let your faithful one see the Pit.
You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Amen.