

Dying and Rising with Jesus

Homily for the Easter Vigil 2017 at St. Paul Cathedral

Romans 6:3-11; Matthew 28:1-10

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! We hear these profound words of St. Paul to the Romans: “Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.” What might these mean?

In a few short moments we will witness the immersion of those joining the Church into the waters of baptism. In the ancient Church, the baptistery was seen as a kind of “tomb” or sepulcher. Yet rather than dirt burying the body, in baptism the body is buried in water. The person entering this tomb of baptism is thought to be “dying” to an old way of life and “rising” with Jesus to a new way of life.

As Christians gathered at this Easter Vigil we believe what was true for St. Paul and this early Church in Rome to which he addressed his letter in tonight’s second reading is also true for us tonight for those we baptize. We believe it’s true for each and every one of us too as we renew our baptismal promises. We die and rise with Jesus!

How might we grasp this perennial truth for ourselves? Last week in preaching his funeral homily for Fr. Richard House – a dear friend and brother priest – Monsignor John Ecker made a reference to the many near-death experiences reported in the popular press and studied in some branches of medical research. He mentioned the profound sense of peace and joy that those who came close to death experienced once they were brought back into this life – perhaps similar to the experience of Lazarus whom we read about in St. John’s Gospel on the Fifth Sunday of Lent.

Similarly, in his recent book titled “The Soul’s Upward Yearning,” Fr. Robert Spitzer notes the way scientists have been studying near-death experiences for some 40 years. Scientists often attribute this to hallucinations or oxygen deprivation yet the accounts are so consistent and so detailed that they suggest that something more lies beyond this life, as we know it. Yet with remarkable consistency and across a variety of cultures, patients consistently report post-death experiences of seeing the hospital room in great detail, recognizing loved ones, of being drawn towards a light, being taken towards a loving presence and having a profound sense of peace. Interestingly, those patients who were physically blind their entire lives who had near-death experiences report “seeing” in amazing detail.

What Fr. Robert Spitzer seems to suggest is that even scientific data suggests that although our bodies are structured for physical death, our souls – our interior selves – seem to be structured for an eternal relationship with God. Hence the famous phrase of St. Augustine in his own conversion experience: “Our souls are restless until they rest in you, O God!”

Fr. Spitzer plays off the insights of the famous North American philosopher, Charles Taylor. In his weighty tome, “The Secular Age,” Taylor notes that 500 years ago, people assumed the presence of God. We see this in the beauty of Cathedrals like the Notre Dame in Paris or the Wörmers Dom in Wörm, Germany. We see it in the art of Michaelangelo and medieval stained glass in Esslingen am Neckar.

Taylor goes on to trace the various historical and philosophical developments that have developed into what he terms a “buffered self,” a sense in our personhood that what’s real is only what we can see and verify individually. As a result our worldview shrinks from one seeing God as the ultimate reference point for all inquiry, including the scientific, to one that sees our individual free inquiry as competitive with that of God. Taken together, the modern world in which we live our daily lives may be much smaller than for those who lived 500 years ago.

Our celebration of baptism and our embrace of God punches holes in this “buffered” universe. Baptism opens up the possibility that life is bigger than what we see and that we are more than random individuals living alone and apart from each other and from a personal relationship with an ultimate reality. We find hope and communion breaking through the limits of our culture, our time and our place in finding relationship with each other and with God. Indeed, what marks Christianity as unique among the world religions is that we can see God’s very face in Jesus and that we can receive God’s very presence in the Eucharist.

Tonight, together with those being baptized, we open ourselves up to a universe far vaster than the one we can see. We open up ourselves to the endless possibilities that God creates in each of us – unique and individual as we are – yet all made in the image and likeness of God. We open up ourselves to the reality that God has placed us here for a purpose and a plan. We open up ourselves so that, even though we each have a specific mission in life, all of us are here because God wants us to flourish and become the great men and women he’s created us to be. That first step in his plan for us is baptism: dying to an old way of viewing ourselves and the world so that we might rise with him now and at the end of time. Peace be with you!