

Paul on Baptism and life in Romans chapter 6.

One of the first films I remember seeing as a child was the epic Cecil B De mille The Ten Commandments. It puzzled me a good deal – there was much there that was not in the Bible stories that I knew – but the crossing of the Red Sea was spectacular – as I recall it, the water stood up in nearly vertical walls high on either side of the corridor through which the people of Israel walked. The danger was obvious, the people clearly scared. Once the crossing was complete, the water crashed down on the pursuing chariots, and formed a deep and level sea again. There could be no going back to slavery, however much people grumbled later.

Baptism in the first century was much more physical than we can easily imagine, even with plunge pools and full immersion baptism. The Jordan river had currents and floods, muddy shores, rocky bottoms. Going down into that was not risk free, and was hardly dignified. A candidate putting his or her head under water was taking a chance that he or she would come up again.

So Paul's description of baptism as dying with Christ to come up to new life is apt.

The passage from the letter to Christians in Rome opens with a rhetorical question – should we carry on sinning so that we can get yet more of God's grace in forgiveness? Tom Wright imagines a picture of the prodigal son , restored to his place at home, but finding life a bit dull after the welcome home party; does he dream of running off again so as to have another great welcome and another party!!

Or more likely, the offer in the gospel of forgiveness to all people, for all failings, is still causing offence - as it did in Jesus' lifetime – are some of the devout saying “ you can't preach this – it sounds as if there is no moral code, no sanctions?”

So Paul argues carefully through chapter 6 of Romans - that baptism, the entry into relationship with Christ as saviour, is once for all, just as the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea from slavery to freedom once for all. However much they grumbled or murmured, or offered

worship to other gods, they could not go back to slavery in Egypt. Paul appears to use the term Christ, (rather than Jesus Christ, as the name of a person) to show the representative role – because the Christ died and is alive, we who participate in the death through the symbol of baptism (or of coming into relationship with the Christ) will also share in his renewed abundant life now, and at some stage share the renewal of the whole world. Yes - we may fail to live up to the perfection, as Peter failed initially in his high intent of unfaltering loyalty to Jesus, - but that does not mean we have lost the relationship with Christ.

Verse 5 – “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” The variety of images used by different commentators to expand on these words does suggest that we are close to the limit of our human understanding.

One commentator talks of our being planted with or in Christ - and a plant must grow where it is planted, it can't move elsewhere. It takes sustenance from that in which it is planted. Another writer says that the image is of the two ends of a broken bone being fused together, with the two ends being firstly the 'we' of Paul and his hearers, and secondly the “very likeness” of Christ's death and resurrection:- where the “very likeness” is something both more distant and more timeless than the historical events, perhaps the permanent effect of Christ's death in the lives of believers. Also the tense of verb used here, I am told, implies that the fusion of the bone ends, or our uniting or planting in Christ's death, is permanent, on-going, not the one-off event of baptism.

Again the tenses suggest, if I have got this right, that Christ's resurrection is complete, but our union in his death and life is on-going. The power of sin ends with death, in the same way that debts, under some legal systems, end at the death of the debtor.

Paul concludes that “you must consider (or reckon) yourselves dead to sin and alive in Christ Jesus.” The verb translated as 'consider' or 'reckon', is a bookkeeping term for casting up accounts. And as we know, proper accounting reports on the true position or balance; how you add up the figures cannot alter the result. Paul is not saying 'try by an effort of will ,to behave as though sin has no power over you, to believe four impossible things before breakfast.' He is saying 'be aware that sin cannot hold you, you are a free person' – with all

the responsibilities that freedom brings, but also the power of Christ for new life.

After the complexities of the letter to Rome, it is a relief to get back to the poetry of the call of Isaiah, in chapter 55, encouraging the exiled community in Babylon to hold to their faith, and even psyche themselves up to return to Jerusalem.

And the poetry is echoed in the New Testament, with Jesus' cry on the last and greatest day of the festival – come to me and drink, with I am come that they may have life and have it abundantly, with the renewal and widening of the Davidic covenant to even nations beyond the then known world.

Seek the Lord while he may be found – is that echoed in the injunctions to work in the light, for the night is coming when no one can work, or to pray for labourers for the fields that are already white for harvest?

My thoughts are not your thoughts – does this ground Jesus' rebuke to Peter – you think as man thinks, not as God thinks?

The image of the rain watering the earth and returning to heaven sounds like the seasonal rains of Palestine, which green the crops and open the flowers, but the ground does not remain wet. What an image of the word of God making equally spectacular changes to the world.

So we have a call to live our lives fully empowered by Christ, and to witness to that life, to the nations whom we have not known, to people who come to us, and people and countries we may visit. May we listen and live. Amen

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10th February 2016.