

ROMANS 6:1-12
DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Some of us believe that we're witnessing the death of the church in Scotland as we once knew it. The church is committed to ministry in every part of Scotland, every community, but it is already struggling to provide the leadership and ministry to make that possible. Churches are struggling to make ends met, without enough resources to keep doing everything that "Churches do" and are struggling to come to terms with that without a deep sense of failure. Many other institutions are going through the same process – people no longer have respect for politicians and the political process as they once did; they are no longer trusted. Trades Unions are no longer the force they were in the land: though they still make themselves heard from time to time, membership is falling there too. But for the Church, are we seeing the death of the institution of the Church? Is it no longer the force in the land as a shaper of Christian culture?

This does not leave me in despair! While the institution of the Church may die, God will still be at work in His Church; there will still be a people of God in Scotland, people who belong to God, people who worship, witness, and serve God in the land. The way in which we go about things will be very different in the future from the past, even from now, but there will still be Church, God will still be God, Jesus will still be the Saviour, the Spirit will still be at work in our lives and the Bible will still be the Word of God for the world. Why so confident? Because all through the Bible, the pattern by which God works is a death and resurrection pattern. We are coming to Easter and the events that centre on the death and resurrection of Jesus, events at the heart of Christian faith; indeed without death and resurrection there is no gospel, no Christian faith. The pattern by which God works with that principle of death and resurrection is not only in the events of Easter, but is at the heart of our lives as Christians as we shall see.

Israel as a nation had died. The nation no longer existed as an independent entity; the people are in exile in Babylon. God calls Ezekiel to be a prophet to the people in exile, to bring God's word to them so that they may understand what's going on. Probably the most famous part of Ezekiel's prophecy is the piece we read earlier, in chapter 37, the vision of the valley of dry bones. In his vision, Ezekiel is placed in the valley and all he sees round him are dry, dead bones. God says: "*Son of ...*" (Ezekiel 37:3) He is then given the task of preaching to these dry bones: "*Dry bones...*" (37:5) and in response to his preaching, the bones come together and bodies are formed round them, but they just lie there. In part 2 of his vision, he is told to pray: "*Prophesy to...*" (37:9) and as the breath (or the Spirit – it is the same word) comes into these bones and bodies, they come alive again, a vast army of living, breathing people. The dead bones come back to life. Death and resurrection are at work and for Ezekiel this is a parable of the nation, that the nation will come back to life again as the people of God; they will return home and be prosperous!

We are approaching Easter! On Friday, I was in the primary school taking part in an assembly and the Primary 6 children had been looking at Easter pictures through the website of the National Gallery; they looked at three or four classic pictures of the events leading up to the death of Jesus. They could tell me about the symbolism in some of pictures and what was going on in these pictures. But when I asked them how these pictures *felt*, they were sad pictures. Of course they are, because they are all about death and the things leading up to the death of Jesus at Calvary. But the story doesn't end there; if it did end there, then Jesus is just another tragic hero whose life is cut short and whose followers have wasted their breath and energy. There is resurrection; Good Friday turns into Easter Sunday; death is

transformed by resurrection and the heart of the Christian faith is Jesus, the Saviour who died and who was raised by the power of God to live forever. We need both: we can't have resurrection without death, that just doesn't make sense; but without resurrection, the death of Jesus is never good news. Death and resurrection is the pattern at the heart of the gospel.

It is also the pattern at the heart of the Christian life as well and this we need to understand. Romans 6 is all about our connection with Jesus through faith and here is something of what that connection is all about, by the pattern of death and resurrection. There are three things: we are connected; this is how we are connected; here are the implications of that connection. At the centre is the idea of death and resurrection. Some people were suggesting that if the gospel is all about grace, then it doesn't matter how we live, God will forgive us anyway; we can live in any way we like, is simply won't matter because God is gracious. Paul puts an end to that idea!

1. We are connected with Jesus: *"we were..." (Romans 6:4)* Baptism is a profession of faith. It is not a ceremony by which we give a child a name, or an excuse for a party; baptism is a profession of our faith, either on our own behalf or on behalf of our children and at the heart of that ceremony is the notion that we are connected with Jesus by our faith and baptism is symbolic of that. Indeed, the first Christians and Christians who baptise by immersion of the whole person in water, act this out; they go down into the water to die with Jesus and come back up out of water in new life. Even without that particular practice, baptism is about our connection with Jesus, especially in His death and resurrection. By faith we not only believe some things about Jesus, but we are connected to Him; He is part of our life and we share in the grace and the salvation He has achieved for us; the benefits are ours and we are new people.

2. How we are connected: *"If we have..." (Romans 6:5)* We understand the fact that Jesus died: it is a historical fact, a part of the story; we have some sense of why He died, "He died that we might be forgiven." But Paul talks about the death we die when we believe, a death to self and to sin: *"Our old self was crucified...body of sin might be done away with" (Romans 6:6)* Something in us needs to die. Then: *"Now if we..." (Romans 6:8)* We are raised to a new kind of life. What is it that shaped our life before we were Christians? Ego, self, "I'll do what I want"; life is self-centred; "I am on throne of my own life so that I will govern and direct the person that I want to be." That is in direct rebellion against the way in which God has made us, but that is the way we go and it leads us to walk away from God and to be sinful people. Sin is not about doing wrong things; sin is first and foremost having the wrong person in charge of our lives; we are in charge instead of Jesus. Faith changes that: by faith we confess that Jesus is Lord and Paul talks about us as being raised to a new kind of life, being new people, a new creation. Something has happened to us. As Christians we are not a slightly modified version of the old person; we are totally new people with Jesus in charge. This is the connection that is described by death and resurrection!

3. The connection has implications: there are two of them: *"Count yourselves..." (Romans 6:11)* *"Do not let ..." (Romans 6:12)* First of all, "see yourself for what you are." I've not seen *12 years a slave* but some have said that it is a harrowing, but fascinating story, about New York teacher who is abducted and sold into slavery, and has to live as a slave; Paul's example is other way round, the slave who has been set free and the slave set free – how does he live? Does he continue to live as a slave? No! He lives as a free man, with a new freedom and new priorities and new joys. The other example Paul gives is of marriage: when people get married, there are changes to be made; does the married couple continue with a single-

person lifestyle? It won't work; they need to change the way they think, not just pleasing themselves, but taking note of someone else in that relationship. As Christians, we need to understand what has happened to us; we need to think in a new way; to realise that we are new people; to realise that life is changed and we can't simply live as if nothing had happened and we have no connection to Jesus.

Secondly, "live as if you are connected to Jesus" Who is King of our lives now? As Christians, the king of our lives is Jesus. We have to put that into practice and actually be the kind of people Jesus wants us to be. I've been reading some of Proverbs this week; it is hard going at times because there is just so many of them! But the value of Proverbs is that there is so much practical wisdom in their verses; if you want to know what it means in day to day life to live with Jesus as king then go to Proverbs. It affects what we say and the way we say it; it affects the way we do business, or treat other people, or go to work; it affects our attitude to money and possessions; it affects every single part of our lives. Christians who have shared in death and resurrection are to live as people who have died to ourselves and to the old ways of sin and who have been raised to share new life in Christ. We profess that; now we are to live it.

In 2 weeks time we celebrate Easter and we will concentrate on the events in the life of Jesus. We will talk about the death of Jesus and what that means; on Easter Sunday we will talk about the resurrection and all that means. Here, by way of preparation, is the pattern of death and resurrection as it touches us and as it touches the church. We are people of faith connected with Jesus, and we share in death and resurrection: we need to realise what has happened to us and live as if we have died and been raised. What is it that sets Christians apart from others? What sets us apart is what has happened to us, if only we realised. We are connected to Jesus; that's what makes us different; we're connected to Jesus in death and resurrection, we are new people, the old has been put to death; live as if it were so!