

LIFE BEYOND DEATH

Sometimes I wish I never die. Sometimes I wish I could live forever and ever. But For some strange reason, I cannot live forever. I don't even know my time and place of death much more to name those I want to see at my funeral. You and I must die at some point. The sad reality of death and dying is, that is one of the instances of human life that we are stripped off of anything we have come to adore about ourselves, it is a time when we lose total control over ourselves and our lives. You know, I wish I never die. Because the thought of missing my loved ones, missing life, missing the beauty of creation, missing my favorite crab cakes, chicken and rice, makes me want to live forever.

But if we cannot live forever, then what is it about life that makes life worth its while? If life as we know it begins in the womb and ends in the tomb, then what is it about life? What is the point of all that we accumulate, all that we fight for, all that we work for and all the people we surround ourselves with, if all that life offer to us in return is death? If that is all life is, then I believe many of you us would have preferred not to have been born at all. But unfortunately, to be born or not to be born is also not our choice. So what then is our choice? What is our claim on life?

These are some of the existential questions that people in different places and at different times have dealt with. But because people believed that life offers more than just the tomb, different ideas and methodologies have been developed to deal with these questions. One method which is prevalent in most societies is reincarnation.

The underlying philosophy of reincarnation is that life is a cycle: we are born, we live life to the best of our abilities, we die and we come back to life again. Death in this process looks more like a recycle bin. One clear example which in many ways has helped sustain the divergent racial composition of India is the Caste System. And for all its evils, this system thrived on the back of the belief in reincarnation. If for instance you are a Brahmin or an untouchable, the social category in which one belongs is unchangeable. If you are a Brahmin, you cannot be an untouchable and if you are an untouchable, you cannot be a Sudra during your life time. This is because the category in which one finds himself or herself is not by accident or sheer misfortune, rather it is a direct consequence of what one did in the previous life. What you are today is a complete reflection of what you did in your previous life. And so if you are an untouchable, the only way to set yourself free from Karma is to act right so you can become a Brahmin or Sudra when you reincarnate.

Even though this idea of a person's life being a reflection of that person's previous life may stand in sharp contrast with what we know about our God and our relationship with Him through His Son Jesus Christ, more often than not we are also tempted to assume that our works or actions, whichever they may be, determines whether we have or will earn a place in God's kingdom.

Many are the faithful Christians who have come to believe that we are justified by our works; that somehow, somehow what we do earns us a favor from God. That the grace and favor of God is not freely given but it is available to only those who by their works of righteousness have not only sought for the grace of God but do possess it because they deserve it.

It is the potential danger in this assumption that Paul seeks to address in today's Epistle to the Romans. Whereas Paul does not disparage works, he also does not see works as the ultimate reflection of righteousness. Because to emphasize on works is to talk about expectations, returns or what is due you and me. But we are not dealing with expectations.

Paul rather places Faith over and above works of righteousness to remind us that our relationship with God is not an investment nor does it look it one. We do not invest ABC so we can expect XYZ in return, nor is it a relationship that is characterized by a qui pro quo. It is rather a relationship that is founded, grounded, built, sustained and thrives on Faith and nothing more. No Mas!!

And that is exactly what Jesus told Nicodemus when he came to see Him that night. His status as a Pharisee meant that he was well versed in the Torah, and did not only know what he had to do to be called

righteous, but he also knew and taught that righteousness was measured by the extent to which one kept the Torah.

Even though Nicodemus was himself a Rabbi, he saw something utterly different in this particular Rabbi. What is it about this Rabbi that makes Him do the things that he does? What is it about this Rabbi that makes Him so different from me? I believe that his curiosity to know more about Jesus was the basis for the visit. And when he sees Jesus, he says “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God” In response, Jesus tells him that no one can see the kingdom of God unless born from above. Nicodemus wonders how can one enter into the mother’s womb and be reborn. But Jesus tells him that one must rather be born of water and the spirit before one can enter into the kingdom of God.

Suddenly, all that Nicodemus knew and had taught others about God was being torn into pieces by this particular Rabbi. However perplexed Nicodemus may have been, the enormous clarity that Jesus offers to him becomes for me the bedrock of my hope and the light that eats away the darkness and confusion that surround me and my relationship with God. Now I can see clearly. But even more than that, life becomes so meaningful and fulfilling. Because the love of God in Christ Jesus refuses to let the grave be my end.

I do not have to do anything to earn the grace and favor of God, but if only I believe and if only I am willing to surrender my all to Jesus, death does not become a recycle bin for me, death becomes a process through which I can look forward to a greater life of fellowship and some great crab cakes, chicken and rice. Amen.