

We begin Lent thinking about sin, and we end Lent thinking about death. On Ash Wednesday we acknowledge our sins. On Good Friday we recall the death of Christ. As surely as he can forgive our sins, so can he raise us from the dead. That is the meaning of the passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans that we hear as our second reading today.

Paul compares sin and death in order to contrast Adam with Christ. According to the Book of Genesis, God created Adam, but God did not create sin and death. Adam committed sin, and death entered the world as his punishment. In the view of St. Paul, death is something that ought not to be. We feel this every time someone we love dies.

But Christ undid what Adam had done. Adam disobeyed, but Jesus obeyed – we see that in the temptation in the desert. Adam brought sin into the world, but Jesus brought grace – we see that whenever he forgave the sins of others. Adam brought death into the world, but Jesus brought life – we see that in the great story of the resurrection.

So Paul says to the Romans, "Through one man [Adam,] sin entered the world, and through sin, death." Everyone dies. That is part of life. It is fearsome to think about. But the grace of Christ overwhelms the sin of Adam. Paul goes on: "just as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so, through one righteous act, acquittal and life came to all." Through the disobedience of Adam, we were made sinners, and through the obedience of Jesus, we will be made righteous.

We are embarrassed by our sins and fearful of our death. But the gift of Christ overpowers those forces. Throughout Lent we do penance and receive forgiveness. This strengthens our hope that when we die, we shall rise again.

Because of this contrast between Adam and Christ, years ago a tradition developed that Jesus died on the very spot where Adam was buried. He didn't, but there's a tradition that he did. Calvary was called the place of the skull, and some people thought the skull belonged to Adam. Some artists painted a skull and bones under the cross. They are supposed to represent the tomb of Adam, and that is why there is another tradition for putting a skull and crossbones on a bottle of poison. When Adam ate the forbidden fruit, he became mortal; if you drink a bottle of poison, you'll find out how mortal you are too.

The connection between Adam's sin and death also explains two of our doctrines about Mary. We believe that she was without sin – immaculate – from her conception. We also believe in her assumption: at the end of her life she did not suffer the effects of death; Adam's sin did not affect her; her body did not decay; she was assumed body and soul into heaven. Her immaculate conception is the cause of her assumption.

We begin Lent thinking of sin and end Lent thinking of death, but a spirit of hope pervades this entire season. Do penance this Lent, but do it with the conviction that Christ forgives us, and he braces us for death with the good news of eternal life.