

Some Misconceptions About Death in Papua New Guinea

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In a country, where stories are told and retold, and where each storyteller adds his little bit, to spin a better yarn, in order to leave his mark on the listener; in a country, where people hunger and thirst after gossip, it is not surprising to find many misconceptions about death among Christians.

Probably, the most-common misconceptions arise from an inability to accept the death of a loved one, or from the guilt associated with their death. In such cases the mourners fast from the favourite foods of the deceased, as a sign of the depth of their sorrow, and continuing love. There is a strong desire to contact the beloved dead, to express those things that one failed to express in life. Murray Parkes, and other psychiatrists, have described such feelings as a normal stage in the grief process.

In the Popondetta dioceses of the Anglican church, a death is still believed by many to be the result of sorcery. At the same time, there is a strong belief that the dead go to heaven, where they have access to all the wealth and riches that expatriates have. It is also believed that some people return from the dead as expatriates.

Places connected with religion, such as Christian communities of religious brothers and sisters, are seen as obvious places for the dead to pass through on their way to the other world. In Popondetta, it is thought that the dead sign the visitors' book on their way through, and people go there, or to the community of the society of Saint Francis, to contact dead relatives. Those in authority in the church are thought to hold the keys of the kingdom, by which they have access to its secrets and riches. When the wife of one important figure in the church visited England, the story went around that she had met her dead daughter there. This story probably arose because someone had gone to the trouble, and expense, of serving pawpaw for her, which she could not refuse, without causing offence, but which, by eating, caused her to break her mourning fast.

When people saw her eating pawpaw again, after her return from England, they concluded that she was no longer mourning for her daughter, because she has met her again.

Last year, we had a very difficult Bible study leaders' camp, where the majority of participants held these misconceptions of the dead, and were interpreting the stories of Jesus' death and resurrection in this light. Fortunately, the bible college students, who were also attending, recognised this misconception, and spoke to them in their own language, to put them right. However, since they were talking in their own language, I could not check up on their efforts.

When the people come to a local religious community to contact dead relatives, their main concern seems to be to get something out of them, or to appease them, so that they will not bring harm. In former times, an ancestor, who had power in gardening or hunting, would have been called upon to give his power to a living relative. Now, the ancestors are used to get hold of the sort of goods that expatriates receive from far-away places. The whole approach to the ancestors seems very materialistic. The real interest is in getting hold of things they want. There is little evidence of respect, or admiration, of the ancestors, for their own sake, or as people, who have gone to be closer to a power, who is, in some way, more good, or true, than any known on earth. Talk about the ancestors being with God gets no comeback. In some parts of the world, veneration of the ancestors has seemed to be based on a feeling of religious awe, which could be used as a starting point for the worship of God. In the Christian cult of the saints, the saints are seen as being, at once, friends of mankind, and friends of God, so that they can lead our thoughts and feelings beyond themselves to God. So far, attempts to use prayers to the ancestors as symbols of worship of God have fallen flat, because the prayers seem to be strictly for what the people want, and there is little room for them to point, as symbols, to anything higher.

It is possible to get beyond talk of merely material things, to talk of the soul, when dealing with the problem of sorcery. Jesus speaks of a difference between the killing of the body, and the worse fate of being thrown by God into hell (Luke 12:4-5). On this basis, we can distinguish between the death of the body, and the death of the soul. Some forms of sorcery, such as *sanguma*, seem to be an attempt to kill the soul as well as

the body. Not only is the victim killed, but also his death is made to seem like the work of an evil power, which has taken the dead person into its grip. We need to affirm that God is the only judge, and though human beings may murder the body, each person is responsible to God for their own sin, and no form of sorcery can override God's final judgment on what is to happen to the soul. Luke 12:4-5 is therefore an effective antidote to fear of sorcery.

Talk about eternal punishment is unpopular, but it occurs several times in Matthew's gospel (Matt 13:4, 18:8, 25:41), in St Paul's letters (2 Thess 1:9), and in the book of Revelation (Rev 20:14). While it is right to direct our attention to the love, out of which God sends Jesus Christ to save us, eternal punishment remains in the background to complete the picture, for it is that from which God has saved us.

But, taken all in all, the New Testament teaching of death emphasises life. Christ took upon Himself our nature, in order that He might destroy the devil, who has power over death (Heb 2:14). For the Christian, then, death becomes an event, through which one passes on the way to the fullness of eternal life. Christ is the "author of life" (Acts 3:15), the "Word of life" (1 John 1:1). Eternal life, for the believer, is not the immortality of the soul, which is claimed for the ancestor, but the resurrection of the body by God. Eternal life, therefore, is living in the presence of God, from whom not even death can separate us (Rom 8:38). We do not live in the presence of God, on our own, but in the company of all those whom He has raised: "the communion of saints". Resurrection, then, is a work of the grace of God, not human merit, yet God's grace is experienced in human community. Melanesian culture may, therefore, be able to help us to see how God's grace is shared, not only among the living, but also extends to the members of our community, who, though they have died, are still linked to us in love.