

There is an ancient Jewish legend which says that, in his final illness, Adam sent his son Seth together with Eve into the region of Paradise to fetch the oil of mercy, so that he could be anointed with it and healed. The two of them went in search of the tree of life, and after much praying and weeping on their part, the Archangel Michael appeared to them, and told them they would not obtain the oil of the tree of mercy and that Adam would have to die. Later, Christian readers added a word of consolation to the Archangel's message, to the effect that after 5,500 years the loving King, Christ, would come, the Son of God who would anoint all those who believe in him with the oil of his mercy. In the legend, St. Michael says to them, "The oil of mercy from eternity to eternity will be given to those who are reborn of water and the Holy Spirit. Then the Son of God, Christ, abounding in love, will descend into the depths of the earth and will lead your father into Paradise, to the tree of mercy."

Of course, all this did not happen. It is merely a legend, but this legend expresses the anguish of the human heart in the face of a destiny of illness, pain and death that has been imposed upon us by original sin. In the face of this, man resists death. People have constantly thought – there must be some cure for death. Sooner or later it should be possible to find the remedy not only for this or that illness, but for death itself. Surely the medicine of immortality must exist.

Today too, the search for a source of healing continues. Modern medical science strives, if not exactly to exclude death, at least to eliminate as many as possible of its causes, to postpone it further and further, to prolong life more and more.

But what would it really be like if we were to succeed, perhaps not in doing away with death totally, but in postponing it indefinitely, in reaching an age of several hundred years? Would that be a good thing? I don't think it would. Humanity would become extraordinarily old. Endless life would be no paradise, if anything it would be a condemnation.

The true cure for death must be different. It cannot lead simply to an indefinite prolongation of this current life. It would have to transform our lives from within. It would need to create a new life within us, a life that is truly fit for eternity. It would need to transform us in such a way that we would live, not in a state of constant longing, but in fullness. What is new and exciting in the Christian message, in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, was and is that we are told: yes indeed, this cure for death, this true medicine of immortality, does exist. It has been found. It is within our reach. In baptism, this medicine is given to us. A new life begins in us, a life that matures in faith and is not extinguished by the death of the old life, but rather when we die physically life is then fully revealed.

To this some, perhaps many, will respond: is it really so? How does this transformation of the old life come about? Once again, there is an ancient Jewish legend that can help us form an idea of the mysterious process that begins in us at baptism. In this legend, the patriarch from the Old Testament Enoch was taken up to the throne of God. But he was filled with fear in the presence of the glorious angelic powers, and in his human weakness

he could not contemplate the face of God. “Then God said to Michael, ‘Take Enoch and remove his earthly clothing. Anoint him with sweet oil and vest him in the robes of glory!’ And Michael took off my garments, anointed me with sweet oil, and this oil was more than a radiant light ... its splendour was like the rays of the sun. When I looked at myself, I saw that I was like one of the glorious beings.”

This is what happens in baptism, being reclothed in the new garment of God. In fact, this changing of garments is something that continues for the whole of life. What happens in baptism is the beginning of a process that embraces the whole of our life – it makes us fit for eternity, in such a way that, robed in the garment of light of Jesus Christ, we can appear before the face of God and live with him for ever.

In the rite of baptism there are two elements in which this event is expressed and made visible in a way that demands commitment for the rest of our lives. There is first of all the rite of renunciation and the promises. In the early Church, the one to be baptized turned towards the west, the symbol of darkness, sunset, death and hence the dominion of sin. The one to be baptized turned in that direction and pronounced a threefold “no”: to the devil, to his pomp and to sin. What was being renounced by this “no” was a type of culture that ensnared man in the adoration of power, in the world of greed, in lies, in cruelty. This renunciation – although in less dramatic form – remains an essential part of baptism today. We remove the “old garments”, which we cannot wear in God’s presence. A better way to put it is: we begin to remove them. This renunciation is actually a promise in which we hold out our hand to Christ, so that he may guide us and reclothe us continually throughout our lives. What these “garments” are that we take off, what the promise is that we make, becomes clear when we see in the fifth chapter of the Letter to the Galatians what Paul calls “works of the flesh” – a term that refers precisely to the old garments that we remove. Paul names them: “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like” (Gal 5:19ff.). These are the garments that we remove: the garments of death.

Then, in the practice of the early Church, the one to be baptized turned towards the east – the symbol of light, the symbol of the newly rising sun of history, the symbol of Christ. The candidate for baptism determines the new direction of his or her life: faith in the Holy Trinity to whom he or she entrusts himself. Thus it is God who clothes us in the garment of light, the garment of life. Paul calls these new “garments” “fruits of the spirit”, and he names these too: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22).

In the early Church, the candidate for baptism was then truly stripped of his garments. He or she descended into the baptismal font and was immersed three times – a symbol of death. His or her former death-bound life the candidate gives over to death with Christ, and he or she lets themselves be drawn up by and with Christ into the new life that transforms him for eternity. Then, emerging from the waters of baptism the newly baptized were clothed in the white garment, the garment of God’s light, and they received the lighted candle as a sign of the new life in the light that God himself had lit within

them. They knew that they had received the medicine of immortality, which was fully realized at the moment of receiving Holy Communion. In this sacrament we receive the body of the risen Lord and we ourselves are drawn into this body, firmly held by the One who has conquered death and who carries us through death.

Baptism is no mere cleansing, still less is it some complicated initiation into a new club or association. It is death and resurrection, rebirth to new life. Indeed, the cure for death does exist. Christ is the tree of life, once more within our reach. If we remain close to him, then we have life. The risen Lord gives us joy: the beginning of true life now and the promise of the fullness of life for all eternity.

Given by Father Mark Gurtner at Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on Easter, 2012.