

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Amen.

After I wrote what was to be my Easter Vigil sermon, I turned to the lessons appointed for tomorrow, and discovered that now that we're on this blasted Revised Common Lectionary, we're hearing the same gospel tomorrow that we just did. So, to avoid making those of you who will be in church tomorrow listen to a re-run, let's look at the Epistle and save the bit at the tomb for the morning.

It's just as well, because it seems that the dramatic, numinous liturgy that we experience tonight lends itself to some theologizing, and Paul is not short on theology in his *Letter to the Romans*. The problem is that reading a short passage from this most theologically developed of epistles is a bit like taking a cumulative examination. During the five chapters which precede tonight's reading Paul develops a subtle argument relating to

the nature of sin and the Old Testament Law, and we're picking up in the middle of things.

What is most important for our purposes is to note the argument as it is developed in the seven verses prior to what we heard tonight. Paul points out that before Christ "trespass multiplied", which is to say that the people wandered farther and farther away from God, but that "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more". If this were the case, then, does it mean that we ought to sin boldly that grace may continue to abound? To this suggestion, Paul replies "By no means!" and that's where tonight's reading picks up.

But before we get into the substance of his response, it is important to note that Paul's recognition that grace abounds in the presence of increasing sin has already been highlighted liturgically tonight. In all of those Old Testament readings we read a bit ago we saw how the presence of personal and collective sin could not obstruct

God's Grace. Mercy and deliverance and renewal seem to have been given to Israel regardless of the people's obedience or lack thereof. A friend of mine once put it thus: Grace is like grits; it just comes with it.

So, why not sin boldly so that grace may abound? Paul says it's because we've died to sin and risen to a new life. Recognize that our death and resurrection as far as Paul is concerned is a here-and-now phenomenon. That's not to say that he's denying the fact that we will literally die and then literally be raised from the dead at some point in the future. That's just not what he's particularly interested in in this passage, and it's certainly not the only level on which the Paschal Mystery (i.e. Christ's own death, burial, and resurrection) brings about our own resurrection.

We are also raised in this life. We die to sin in Baptism, Paul tells us, and are "alive to God in

Christ Jesus" now. It seems to me that this is a terribly important thing for us to hear on Easter. We must, of course, acknowledge the eternal consequences of Christ's Resurrection, but unless we recognize the Resurrection's implication for our present life, then we're not living as Christians, are we? We're just waiting to die as Christians. Seeing as how we are alive in Christ Jesus now—seeing as how we've already been raised in a very important sense—we cannot deny our responsibilities here-and-now and twiddle our thumbs until the general Resurrection. We've got some work to do.

For one thing, we can't just sin so that Grace can abound. In the second chapter of *Romans* we learn that we are very much accountable for our works. Indeed, having died to sin, we have even more responsibility in this regard. I like to think of it this way, and I'm relatively sure I'm somewhere within the bounds of Orthodoxy in this interpretation of *Romans*. We use human nature a lot

as an excuse. If somebody behaves badly we say "well that's just human nature" and we even have to develop systems of law and finance which assume that our nature is pretty rotten. But, if we have died to sin and risen to new life, that's not our nature anymore.

We can, of course, act against our nature, and we often do, both for good and ill. It's my nature to eat Arby's take-out and play X-Box but I know I should take a walk and study theology, so I force myself. On the other hand, it's my nature to be generally beneficent, but I can sometimes convince myself through some kind of twisted logic to act against this better part of my nature and be cold and unresponsive.

So, what I'm suggesting is that sin is unnatural for a baptized person, but that doesn't mean it's hard to accomplish. Eating chocolate is unnatural and dangerous for a dog, but we all know

how easily it can happen. So it is with sin and we who have been raised.

Paul's focus on the Resurrection we've already experienced also has a more positive implication. It means that we aren't just in a waiting room, waiting to go to our real home in the sweet by and by, so it's not just what we avoid (namely *sin*) that matters, but also what we accomplish.

Remember that prayer we heard on Good Friday and then again just a few minutes ago: "let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection." That doesn't mean that the heavenly street builders just got their last shipment of gold pavement. It means that God is doing things in this old world, and it means that it's good enough for us to be involved, too. Alleluia, Christ is risen, and so are we, so let's start acting like it. Amen.