

## **WHAT DO THE CHRISTIANS BELIEF ABOUT DEATH?**

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Sometimes back a journalist friend Mr. Bakul Taylor phoned me and asked: “Fr. Varghese, what do you Christians belief about death? Can you enlighten me about it? Can you also tell me about the funeral rites of the Christians?”

The Christians hold very clear ideas about death and the life after death. At the foundation of the Christians belief about death there is the clear message of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus’ friend and brother of Martha and Mary, Lazarus died Jesus and his disciples went to his house. The Gospel of John in the Bible has given a very clear picture of the event.

“Martha said to Jesus, ‘If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died! But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask him for.’

“‘Your brother will rise to life,’ Jesus told her.

“‘I know,’ she replied, ‘that he will rise to life on the last day.’

“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’”(John 11, 21-26).

As Jesus has said it, the Christians truly believe in the life after death. The prayers and the whole burial service give a clear picture of the Christians’ belief in the life after death.

Specific biblical passages are chosen and read during the prayers at the funeral rite. For instance, a passage from Isaiah says: “The Sovereign Lord will destroy death for ever! He will wipe away the tears from everyone’s eyes and take away the disgrace his people have suffered throughout the world. The Lord himself has spoken!” (Isaiah 25, 8).

In his first letter to the Corinthians St. Paul clearly says that everyone will die and everyone will be raised to new life. “But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised. For just as death came by means of a man, in the same way the rising from death comes by means of a man. For just as all people die because of their union with Adam, in the same way all will be raised to life because of their union with Christ” (1 Cor. 15, 20-22).

In the same letter St .Paul adds, “Listen to this secret truth: we shall not all die, but when the last trumpet sounds, we shall all be changed in an instant, as quickly as the blinking of an eye. For when the trumpet sounds, the dead will be raised, never to die again and we shall all be changed” (1 Cor. 15, 51-52).

The Christian teaching and beliefs about death are clearly indicated in the funeral rites and prayers for the departed men and women. Christians believe that death is the consequence of sin. So the funeral prayer says:

“Father, all-powerful and ever-living God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who rose from the dead, our hope of resurrection dawned. The sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality.

“Lord, for your faithful people life is changed not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven.”

The Christians make special prayers at home and in the Church for the forgiveness of the sins of the dead person; because they strongly believe in the resurrection and new life of the deceased person beyond death. The friends and well wishers visit the house of the deceased person and pay tribute to him/her by offering special prayers. The hope of life beyond death gives the bereaved family and people the strength and courage to bear up their pain of the loss.

Blessing the body of the deceased person the priest says a beautiful prayer:

“God of all consolation,  
in your unending love and mercy for us  
you turn the darkness of death  
in the dawn of new life.  
Show compassion to your people in their sorrow.  
Be our refuge and our strength  
to lift us from the darkness of this grief  
to the peace and light of your presence.  
Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,  
by dying for us, conquered death  
and by rising again, restored life.  
May we then go forward eagerly to meet him,  
and after our life on earth  
be reunited with our brothers and sisters  
where every tear will be wiped away.”

The prayers at the grave too express the people’s faith in the eternal life and the hope of meeting the resurrected dear ones and the glorious Jesus, the first One to rise from the death:

“Lord Jesus Christ,  
by the three days you lay in the tomb  
you made holy the graves of all who believe in you;  
and even though their bodies lie in the earth  
they trust that they, like you, will rise again.  
Give our brother/sister peaceful rest in this grave,  
until that day when you,  
the resurrection and the life,

will raise him/her up in glory.  
Then may he/she see the light of your presence,  
Lord Jesus,  
in the kingdom where you live for ever and ever”

The Christians after the burial of their dear ones pray specially for diseased person with relatives and friends on the 3rd, 7th and 30th day and also on the death anniversary in their homes and also in the Church. On such occasions the relatives and friends may also visit the cemetery and pay homage to the diseased person by praying and decorating the tomb with flowers.

Then, the whole Christian world prays twice during the year for all the people who have gone before them. On November first they remember all the known and unknown saints and call upon the saints in heaven to intercede for them. And on November second they pray for all the diseased people in the world. On the day special prayer services are held at the graveyard after cleaning and decorating the tombs with flowers. The priests also bless with holy water all the tombs in a cemetery.

Then, in the Holy Mass specially offered for the diseased person, the priest says:

“God, our creator and redeemer,  
by your power Christ conquered death  
and returned to you in glory.  
May all your people who have gone  
before us in faith  
share his victory  
and enjoy the vision of your glory  
for ever”

Behind all these prayers and rituals for the diseased, the Christians believe in the unity and communion of all saints, all diseased persons and all the living people on earth. So the Christian proclamation of their faith says, “I believe in... the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting”. (contact the author: [ciss@satyam.net.in](mailto:ciss@satyam.net.in))

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