

Column

Churchyards with mossy markers and pots of fading flowers, indeed cemeteries of all sorts, hold a strange and enduring attraction. They are the who's who of a community. The rogue and the highly respected, rich and poor, lie side by side; indeed, God's Acre is the great leveling field of human society.

Sometimes, early in the morning when there is still mist in the air, I walk along the path leading to the graves behind the church I serve. The oldest is nearing 120 years old. It, along with others of the same family, are enclosed in a massive three-foot thick stone wall. One member of this family – the patriarch – was in the General Assembly of the state of Georgia. Others farmed or operated local businesses in town.

Before arriving at the walled area, I walk past another family plot. It contains three graves: a man, his wife and a grown son. Twenty or more years ago, several members of this family who now live in another state visited the church yard. Every time I approach this plot, I cannot help remembering a comment made by a man in his 70s as he pointed toward the monument of the son: "He was my brother, and he was 'no-count'." No-count or not, there this family member lies in hallowed ground next to his father who was a prominent banker in town.

Churchyards and cemeteries stand as a sombre reminder that "here we have no continuing city" (Hebrews 13:14). We live in a rented field. All that seems so secure and permanent at the moment can be snatched from us without notice.

That thought would be utterly discouraging were it not for the cross and resurrection of Jesus. If all we saw were graves row on row, we might well be moved to cry out with the writer of Ecclesiastes: "All is vanity and vexation of spirit" (1:14).

In Romans 5, the apostle Paul likewise speaks of this great, pressing dilemma of the human race, death and non-meaning. Here he sees all standing in solidarity with Adam, guilty before the judgment bar of God, without excuse and without hope.

He sees something else as well. In the same chapter, Paul introduces a second 'Adam' and second head of the human race. This One is none other than Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus comes to our rescue by drawing the sin of the world and its penalty upon Himself, making it possible for us miserable sinners to go free. The cross draws a black line through the two great fears of mankind – death and non-meaning.

It is for this reason the cross is found in most church yards and cemeteries. This ancient symbol, without words, turns “abandon hope all ye who enter here” into “because I live, ye shall live also.”

A place of death has become a place of life for all who believe . . . yes, even for those the world reckons as ‘no counts’!

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility; Mercifully grant, that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the Sunday next before Easter, Palm Sunday, Book of Common Prayer).

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