

Holy Saturday - Caught between earth and heaven

The astonishing story hidden in the Silent Saturday

I have always felt a strange emptiness around the church, and an ache within me, each Holy Saturday morning. It is like a suspension of time after our intense experience of Good Friday's trauma. It is as though everything is put on hold in that still, slow moment between two powerful liturgies with their soul-sized re-remembering. Small wonder I have felt uneasy. The quiet non-time of these first hours after his death concealed perhaps the most intense of all Jesus' conflicts – his naked encounter with the raw powers of hell, so that his father's beloved creation would soon be liberated.

Holy Saturday – the forgotten day, yet the most amazing day of destiny. On Holy Saturday some years ago I felt the need to be alone. As huge, late petals of snow gathered on the just-opened cherry blossoms throughout Yorkshire, I headed for Scarborough. I wanted to be near something vast; something that hinted at mystery. As I watched the long, rolling waves that stretched from the old Roman Signal Station in the north to the South Bay, I reflected on the meaning of this 'longest day', that dark space where the tomb becomes the womb, that uncertain time when the light creeps in.



Could it be, I wondered, that instead of preparing to leave the tomb and the earth behind him, and returning to heaven, his work completed, Jesus was still accomplishing his most precarious mission? We are free to



speculate on the prediction of Jesus in Matthew's gospel about spending three days in the heart of the world so as to inhabit it intensely, and drive it forward from within. Maybe Jesus did not step out of the tomb and head for heaven. Maybe he went deeper into the broken reality of life, where death itself is so powerful, so as to redeem it from within. Having once become human in the body of his mother Mary, he now actually becomes the whole world in a more comprehensive way than he ever could when he walked its roads and climbed its hills.

The Resurrection was first into the universe, not out of it. Because of what happened on Holy Saturday, the Christ who was raised on Easter Sunday was a Christ who now personified a restored Creation. The world, too, had been raised to glory when the stone was moved away. On Holy Saturday Jesus began transforming the body of the world into his own body, so that when the one body was established in glory, the other one was too. I find a richness and a resonance in this way of reflecting on the unseen commerce of Holy Saturday's mystery. Nothing of the true faith is denied; and something deeper about it is clarified. It is also true to our mystical theologies of the Incarnation.

It satisfies our soul in a way that the notion of Jesus ascending into heaven on his own, so to speak, leaving this world below him, doesn't. It contains the image of heaven breaking forth in great joy from the dark womb of the earth itself – but only because Jesus, with his wounds still raw, had first descended into that dark womb.

'Down into death he has penetrated,' wrote Karl Rahner, 'He let himself be overcome by death so that death would gulp him down into the innermost depths of the world. In this way, having descended to the very womb of the earth, to the radical unity of the world, he could give the earth his divine life forever. In death his sacred heart has become the pulse of the innermost heart of the world. And down here, the earth, in her continual development in space and time, sinks her roots into the power of all-mighty God. Now, it is an earth that is transfigured, an earth that is set free, that is untwisted, that is forever redeemed from death and futility.'

After all that happened beneath the deceptive silence of the first Holy Saturday, some theologians see the Resurrection on the following day in the image of the first eruption of a volcano which reveals God's fire now burning in the innermost bowels of the earth. Jesus' Resurrection was a real and cosmic rhythm of glory, dancing out the good news that this new



world had already started turning, that the divine power of a transfigured earth was already leaping from the inner heart of the world – that world which Jesus had invaded to complete what his father had begun.

Holy Saturday's Divine Office recalls the most moving words of Jesus, having gate-crashed hell, to an astonished Adam and Eve, symbolising all humanity and all creation:

'In the past I threw you out of my garden;
Now I have come to take you home.
Then I posted the cherubim to guard you as they would slaves;
Now I make the cherubim worship you as they would God.'



Alone on that long, misty, east-coast shoreline, I was moved and excited by such a beautiful theology of redemption. It ties the heart of Jesus to the heart of the world. He, now, is the essence of this earthly world. That is why it is all right to love the world with all its terrible beauty. We do not need to leave the world to find heaven. God is always, already, at the heart of the world. Many of us, shaped by a small theology, settle for the limited goal of a personal salvation. But the Holy Saturday story invites us to explore a bigger horizon.

To know that Jesus has taken the fight into the realms of the world's prince of darkness itself, and there radically and forever redeemed and restored its original beauty – that is a timely truth for a fear-filled world. Both the terrorists among us and those within us have been identified, encountered and transformed. Jesus has left no loophole unrepaired, for any new evil to steal in. In spite of all that would deny its validity, our Easter hope affirms and confirms the sacred civilisation of our world.

As I drove home it occurred to me that the Easter Vigil does not really end the hidden intensity of Holy Saturday. There is a sense in which it is always Holy Saturday. And it will continue to be Holy Saturday until the last day; until that day when this world ends in the universal Easter Sunday. It has to be this way. It is always Holy Saturday whenever people push back the creeping boundaries of the world's fear, making room for irrepressible hope; where people live the long darkness of original sin while believing in the possibility of the deeper light; where people discover the touch of an invincible spring on the bare branches of their winter lives.

Today we are free to imagine the Risen Christ, triumphantly bursting forth from the haunts of Hades, holding tightly the whole world to his breast with the great and jealous love of a mother for her child, nursing, nourishing and restoring it to its original unity in the heart of God. Small wonder our glimpse of suns that spin and dance on homeland hills each Easter Sunday morning.

