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Entombed: Holy Saturday (John 19: 38-42)

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What profit is there in my blood,
if I go down to the Pit:
can the dust give you thanks,
or declare your faithfulness? (*Psalm 30*)

There's a persistent theme in the psalms that it's to God's advantage that the faithful not be utterly undone. After all, the psalmist reasons, 'if I go down to the Pit, can the dust give you thanks?' Therefore, 'do not let me be put to shame', 'do not deliver me into the hand of my enemy', 'answer me in the day of trouble'. The same theme echoes in the prophet Isaiah. Here is King Hezekiah's thanksgiving after he has recovered from a mortal illness: 'you have held back my life from the pit of destruction ... For Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, they thank you, as I do this day' (Isaiah 38: 17-19).

It's impeccable, it seems – this logic of the living – which purports to give God reason to spare the faithful from the worst. But it turns out not to be the logic of God. For here we are – and Jesus, the most faithful one of all, is dead. He has gone 'down' to the Pit.

We have been focusing this Easter, at Benedictus, on the mystery of Jesus having been 'handed over', on his transition from being one who works and acts in freedom, to one who is 'done unto', who undergoes the decisions and actions of others. And tonight, we confront the totality, the finality of this passion. For Jesus is become a corpse.

It's striking in the account of Jesus' burial how relentlessly our reading describes him as 'a body'. Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate to let him take away the *body* of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his *body*.

Nicodemus also came bearing myrrh and aloes. They took the *body* of Jesus and wrapped *it* (not him, but it) with the spices in linen cloths.

In his novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy writes of women tending the dead body of their friend Susan Henchard, dressing her in her 'coffin clothes' as she had instructed them. When there's debate over whether her wishes had been carried out as she hoped, 'Mother Cuxsom' remarks: 'Well, poor soul, she's helpless to hinder that or anything now ... And all her shining keys will be took from her, and her cupboards opened, and little things [she] didn't wish seen, anybody will see; and her wishes and ways will all be as nothing!'¹ It's a vivid rendering of the sheer 'thingness' of a corpse – the total exposure and undefendedness of the dead to what may be done to them, to their bodies, their preferences, their possessions. When we say so quickly in the words of the Creed that Jesus 'suffered death and was buried', this total exposure and undefendedness, this total absence of agency is what we are talking about.

It is so hard to believe there's any point to this. That there's any help to be got from a dead man, or that passion accomplishes anything. And at this point in the story of Easter, there's no reason at all for the disciples to think that anything more will be possible.

Yet some of them, at least, are following still, still 'with him'. How do we know that? Because they are willingly being handed over as Jesus himself was handed over. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are handed over to reality, giving themselves to what is without complaint or resistance. They do not avoid the death, the corpse; they do not evade the duties of the living to the dead. *And* they are handed over to the call they have dimly perceived is being made on their lives. They are – at last – risking themselves to be true to the truth they glimpsed in Jesus. Both have hedged their bets till now – secret disciples for fear of their colleagues and

¹ Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (London: Pan Books, 1886, 1978), pp.120-121.

community. But something, perhaps, about the unconditional and undefended self-giving of Jesus, has called forth an answering self-giving from them – with no guarantee about what it will mean for them or where it might lead them.

The same things are asked of us. If we want to follow, to be with Jesus this night, we too must consent to be handed over to reality, given to what is. That doesn't mean we can't change things in our lives or in our world – but we can begin only where we are. And it looks like being handed over to the call that's being made on our lives, being true to the truth we have glimpsed in Jesus – the fragile inkling that, despite everything, the heart of life is mercy, forgiveness and love.

What will our being handed over like this accomplish? What did Jesus, and Joseph and Nicodemus being handed over effect? Tonight – waiting outside the tomb – it's too early to say. Yet here we are, still with him, faithful to the half-formed, stubborn hope against hope that from this Pit, from this grave, praise and thanksgiving may yet be raised.