

Holy Saturday (Ps.31; Mark 15.42-47)

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In 1882, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche foresaw the collapse of the philosophical, cultural background on which Christian belief seemed to depend and so proclaimed the ‘death of God’.

‘God is dead’, he wrote. ‘God remains dead. And we have killed him. Yet his shadow still looms. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?’¹

For Nietzsche, a world without God was still a fearful and chaotic place. As time passed, it got easier, it seems, to contemplate. In the twentieth century, in the wake of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, a whole movement in Western theology followed Nietzsche in proclaiming the ‘death of God’. The idea of a transcendent God, so it was argued, had become literally in-credible in the modern, secular world and powerless to transform. And for many in our present time, no further argument is needed – ‘God’ is now not so much ‘dead’ as irrelevant; not even ‘his shadow looms’ any longer. ‘God’ is a matter of indifference, the relic of a bygone worldview.

¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 125, tr. [Walter Kaufmann](#).

Yet long before Nietzsche, post-modern theology and pervasive secularism, our tradition proclaimed that God suffered death and was buried. Tonight we watch at his tomb. And this death, the death not just of an *idea* of God but of God-in-person, has such radical consequences that we still struggle to understand what it could mean or how to speak of it.

So what's happening here?

In all four gospels, after Jesus has breathed his last, Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate to ask for the body. He has taken responsibility for the burial. And, unique among the gospels, Mark insists on the fact that Jesus is dead. The word 'dead' seems deliberately repeated. Pilate wonders if Jesus is already dead; he asks the centurion whether Jesus has been dead for some time; and when he learns from the centurion that he is dead, he grants the body to Joseph. Dead, dead, dead. This man, the Son of God is dead. Our Creed insists on it as well: Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is dead. And his death means that God is a God who suffers at human hands, a God at the mercy of creatures, a God who dies. What kind of a God could this possibly be? Does it not stretch the very concept of God to the limit?

Indeed, for the disciples, Jesus' death brings about a profound dissolution of their theological understanding. Already in Jesus' company, they have been led beyond their old religious identity and belonging. They had dared to believe that in the person of Jesus, God was present in a new way, bringing into being a new Israel and a new relationship with divinity. With him dead, their embryonic new identities and understandings collapse and so any sense of where and who God might be. Saturday, the day the corpse of Jesus lies sealed in the tomb, is a day of utter perplexity, disillusionment and defeat.

That's the Holy Saturday experience from the human side. But what's happening for God? Has God just vacated the stage for a while, giving the

appearance of absence? Or is this death somehow significant in God's own life, and integral to God's work in the world?

In the wake of the experience of resurrection, the church has speculated about what God is doing on this day. The Apostles Creed speaks of Jesus' 'descent to the dead'; the Eastern Orthodox church speaks of the harrowing of hell. In 1 Peter 3 there is an obscure reference to Jesus preaching after his death to the 'spirits in prison', which some take to be a kind of evangelistic preaching tour of the underworld. Significantly, all Orthodox icons of the resurrection show Jesus emerging through the gates of hell, breaking the chains of those captive to death, and leading humanity, beginning with Adam and Eve, out into the light. In this depiction, the resurrection experience of reconciliation, forgiveness and new life is extended backwards in history to encompass the dead. Thus no part of creation is left unreconciled or unredeemed.

This is a beautiful doctrine, one I find deeply appealing. Although I wonder if it would be more consistent to picture this not so much as an active and dualistic conquering of hell, but as a continuation of Jesus' passion, his patient being with us, his willingness to suffer for our sake and to redeem the world by undergoing it. Jesus who was fully present to life, is now fully present to death. He is dead, in the tomb, in the place of the dead. And if the very presence of holiness and love is healing, cleansing and transforming for us in life, then might it not be so in death, and for those in death? As the holy one of God, Jesus' communion with the dead promises to redeem and transfigure. When the sun is present, ice melts. Could it be that on Holy Saturday the warmth of Jesus' presence melts the frozen wasteland of hell?

This makes a kind of theological sense, but all of it is ultimately theological extrapolation. We just don't fully know – and maybe it's just as well, for it seems to me that this too is vital for our salvation. We often speak of trying to 'understand' God, or our faith, or the meaning of our lives ... And yet, if we're

honest, implicit in all of this is a desire not so much to ‘stand under’ as to stand over, to gain some sense of control – knowledge as power, and all that. True understanding, though, invites our humility and our capacity for being with ‘unknowing’. God’s silence on Holy Saturday invites us to remain in this space of theological unknowing, to set aside our ideas about, our *ideology* of divinity. It asks us to dwell, not altogether comfortably, with mystery. This is not about intellectually copping out – but the recognition that only in the poverty of this place are we deeply touched, transformed and changed.

The bottom line for me, is this. If the Easter story is the definitive revelation of God and of who God is for us, then the silence of Holy Saturday must be a vital and necessary word.

It is a word that speaks, first, of the necessary liberation and reconciliation of all things in Christ, in whom as Paul writes, ‘all things hold together’. In the tomb, Jesus is with the dead – how we do not know. What we do know is that the past as well as the present and future needs to be healed, that what has died and seemingly long gone is still powerful, still shadowing life. True healing happens only from within, only as that which needs to be reconciled and transformed is encountered and befriended. By faith, we confess that this is being realised – the living and the dead brought through Christ’s passion into holy communion.

And it is a word that speaks, second, to unmask our idolatry, our ideology of divinity. The omnipotent, omniscient, mighty and transcendent concept of God, the God whose death was so confidently proclaimed by Nietzsche and those who followed him, is an idol. Its pretensions to divinity were exposed by the God of Jesus Christ centuries ago. For this God’s power is not just human power writ large, invulnerable and untouched by suffering. It is the transforming power of merciful, self-giving, vulnerable love. Faith in this God who undergoes suffering and death will never be entirely easy – it invites us not so much to comprehend it

as to follow in his way, to know the truth of this mystery as we participate in it, entrusting ourselves to the same journey of self-giving and dying into life.

On Holy Saturday this is the God we seek to remain true to. This is the faith we confess as we gather at the tomb of our Lord and God – bewildered, perplexed, wondering, hoping. This is the God who invites our trust, as we watch and wait.