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The Crucified God (Mark 15: 42-47)

Holy Saturday

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It was when he was a prisoner of war in Scotland in 1945 that the great German Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann was converted to Christian faith. 'He and his fellow prisoners had just been shown photographs of the horrors in the camps of Belsen and Buchenwald, and were dealing with the nightmare realization that they had been fighting for a regime responsible for unimagined atrocity. Moltmann had little Christian background',¹ but an army chaplain distributed copies of the Bible for the prisoners to read. Later Moltmann described what happened for him:

I read Mark's Gospel as a whole and came to the story of the passion: when I heard Jesus' death cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' I felt growing within me the conviction: this is someone who understands you completely, who is with you in your cry to God and has felt the same forsakenness you are living in now.

And so he said, 'I summoned up the courage to live again'.²

Moltmann went on to write one of the most influential theological books of the 20th century. It's called *The Crucified God* – and its title echoes words of that other war-time German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who said 'only a suffering God can help'.

But how? How does God being crucified help us? Doesn't it just make everything hopeless? It seemed like that for the disciples. Apart from Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus, who watched Jesus die and waited to see where his body was laid, the rest of them have disappeared from view. They're not

¹ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London: SPCK, 2014), p.4.

² Jürgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place: An autobiography* (London: SCM Press, 2007), p.30.

even around to take down his body. No point in anything anymore, no meaning in any of it all along. There was no Messiah, there is no God of mercy and steadfast love; the Romans are proved right – it's all about raw power, domination, the pitiless exploitation of the weak.

And weren't they right to think that? Isn't that true? How does a crucified God help anyone? How does such a God help the children we heard about in the Royal Commission, abused year after year by their parish priests, their lives destroyed, prospects gone? How does a dead Jesus save the pensioners defrauded of their life-savings by corrupt banks, or comfort refugees slowly losing their sanity on Manus Island? How does his suffering change the pitiless self-interest of a Trump, a Duterte, a Putin and protect the rest of us from the fall-out? Where's the help in that? What's the point of it?

You know what God, we don't want you to suffer, we don't want you to die, to be crucified for our sake ... we want you to rescue us, to help us out. Our God, our God, why have you forsaken us?

Holy Saturday is about getting to the end of who we thought God was and how we wanted God to be. It's about confronting all the ways, subtle and not so subtle, that we refuse to give up our fantasies of divinity, our image of God as a 'hugely inflated version of how we would run the universe if we had the chance'.³ And it's about staying with the death of our fantasy long enough, being with Jesus crucified vulnerably enough, to discover what the life, what the love of God really means – the kind of difference it really makes. But we can't get there, we can't be shown that, unless we will be in the place of God-forsakenness, unless we wait at the tomb.

³ Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, p.50.