

**Bring Up the Bodies (Mark 15. 42-47)***Holy Saturday*

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In the past year, I've waded my way through the Wolf Hall trilogy by English novelist Hilary Mantel. Her work is a brilliant piece of historical fiction set in the court of Henry VIII and focused on the character of Thomas Cromwell who rises from obscurity to become Henry's most trusted advisor and one of the most powerful men in England. The second book in the trilogy is called *Bring Up the Bodies*. It tells of the events leading to the execution of Henry's second wife, Anne Boleyn and several of her (male) courtiers. All are charged with treason, victims of their own hubris and of the regime's ruthlessness. The book's title comes from a contemporaneous legal phrase. Those who were accused of treason were regarded as already dead. Thus, when the command was given to bring them to trial, the order went to the Tower of London, 'Bring up the bodies'.<sup>1</sup> It's a terrible and chilling means of distancing those accused from those who will judge them, a pre-emptive denial of the very possibility of reprieve, or of mercy.

But this phrase, 'bring up the bodies', is capable of a different meaning, emerging from a very different sensibility. Some of you will be familiar with icons of the resurrection from the Eastern church. These depict, not the moment of Jesus' resurrection itself, but the rumblings of resurrection in the depths of creation. On this night, Holy Saturday, as the body of Jesus is laid in the tomb, the early church imagined him descending deep into the realm of death, breaking down its doors. He is depicted, standing on those broken doors and shattered gates, extending his hands to an aged Adam and an aged Eve, bringing up the bodies of those who have died, all the ancestors of ancient Israel restored to life and communication.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Wells, 'In the Court of a Monster', <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/08/16/court-monster/>



This is a theme only hinted at in the New Testament literature. It surfaces in the gospel of Matthew when, at the very moment, of Jesus' death the earth is said to quake and the rocks to split, the tombs opened 'and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised' (Matthew 27.52). The Letter to the Ephesians speaks of Jesus descending to the lowest parts of the earth 'so that he might fill all things'

(Ephesians 4.10), and the first letter of Peter speaks tantalisingly of Christ being ‘put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison’ (1 Peter 3.18-19), and of the gospel being proclaimed ‘even to the dead’ (1 Peter 4.6). Admittedly, then, it does not have a strong textual foundation.

Yet it seems a compelling development of the logic of atonement – at-one-ment. If Jesus is the one who comes to reconcile all things, if by his willingness to undergo our suffering and alienation he overcomes all the separations that humanity has become used to – divisions between peoples, between humanity and God, humanity and the rest of creation – then why not also the separation between the past and the future, the living and the dead? As Rowan Williams puts it: ‘What Christ does and suffers affects all things, all areas of human experience and so all aspects of human relation’. He descends to the dead ‘so that death may be swallowed up’.<sup>2</sup> In him, as St Paul puts it, shall all be made alive (1 Cor. 15.22).

Theologically, this all makes a certain kind of sense and satisfies our longing for completeness. But what of our dead? Our bodies? In the icon, Christ might be bringing up the bodies of Adam and Eve, but what of the dead bodies of thousands of children, women and men amid the rubble of Gaza? What of the bodies of murdered concert goers in Moscow and Israel, the violated bodies of women and girls raped and killed in Sudan and Congo? What of our bodies and the bodies of those we love, suffering sickness and pain, ageing and dying? Does Jesus himself becoming a body truly affect our embodied suffering of injustice, frailty and mortality?

At one level, clearly not. We will not be saved from the vulnerability inherent in bodily life, and nor was Jesus. The final outworking of his incarnation, his being born in human form, is that he became a corpse, a dead body, an object to be handled – whether reverently or carelessly – now completely a matter for others.

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<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2003), p.37.

And in this regard, Jesus was more fortunate than many. Joseph of Arimathea, the unlikely hero of the hour, cares for his dignity in death. As we heard, he went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus, and his request was granted. 'Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb'. Yet even Joseph's tenderness does not soften the extremity of Jesus' identification with our mortal frame. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: '[Our] religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world ... the Bible directs [us] to God's powerlessness and suffering'.<sup>3</sup> And on Holy Saturday, as Jesus lies dead in the tomb, it's not at all clear how this helps anything.

It's only in the light of resurrection that we may dare to imagine that something more is underway. That Jesus is not only completely identified with our mortal frame, but also completely identified with the life of God, so that in his being dead he is 'bringing the immediate presence of divine activity into the furthest depths of human experience'.<sup>4</sup> Jesus' descent to the dead imagines 'an action of God which moves "through" death and its frustration',<sup>5</sup> an action of God to connect and liberate that is unaffected by the fact of death. As if that which for us is an insuperable barrier, an absolute cut off-ness, is for God a permeable membrane and no blockage to the creating and re-creating action of love.

It's desperately important not to be glib about this, or to make it sound as though death doesn't matter. To say that the love of God may be active in the place of death does not bring our loved ones back to share our homes and tables; it doesn't restore lives that have been tragically or unjustly cut short, it doesn't magic away the terrible waste of promise and joy, save us from the suffering of anguish, grief and remorse, or from the imperative to do all we can to bring an end to war and murderous violence.

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2003), p.84.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light*, p.27.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light*, p.28.

It does, however, mean this. Williams writes: there is an 'open door ... in the heart of every situation because of God's freedom ...; there is a way to peace and praise from any imaginable place, even the prison in which the dead live'. And whether 'death' means literal bodily death or the other forms of cut-offness by which we find ourselves imprisoned – cut off-ness from our buried selves, our alienated neighbours, our physical world – Jesus comes to 'bring up the bodies'. He has "'filled all things"; he is there in every human experience, opening the door. And so every place has changed'.<sup>6</sup> There is nowhere we may go beyond reach of the love of God. In connection with his body, every body is made alive. In this hope, we wait and pray.

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<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p.90.