

A Reflection on Holy Saturday

31 March 2018



We profess in the Creed that after his death Christ descended into Hell, an article of faith which has something mysterious about it. We can ask what exactly happened to the Lord during that interval between Good Friday and Easter Day. Christians of the Middle Ages spoke of the 'harrowing of Hell', visualising the triumphant Christ proclaiming his victory over the powers of Hell and greeting those faithful souls since the time of our first parents, Adam and Eve, who awaited his redemption.

Our imagination however only takes us so far when we realise that we are dealing with the unknown, in other words what lies beyond death and the limitations of this world. A more fruitful approach, perhaps, to Christ's 'descending into Hell', would be the awareness of just how much the Son of God identified himself with our human condition. As part of his self-abasement in the Incarnation, he tasted fully and without reservation the emptiness and desolation of death. Only by identifying totally with the reality of death could he bring his redeeming power to bear on it.

When Christ entered and experienced the region of death, the enemy of mankind, he would emerge from it victorious in his resurrection, and so in the Pauline phrase, become the first-born of many brethren. Christ's engagement and struggle with death gives hope to all who have to pass the same way. The great apostle Paul would also remark that with Christ's resurrection death has lost its sting, and were Christ not to have arisen the apostolic faith and preaching would be to no avail.

Nevertheless, we should not just pass over Holy Saturday and overlook its real significance for us human beings. A moment's reflection should teach us that Holy Saturday is more than just a period of waiting for the Easter Vigil. It is a day of emptiness when those ancient enemies, sin and death, seemed to have claimed yet another victim in the trial, death and burial of Jesus Christ. We can also ponder the depth and extent of that love which brought the Son of God this low.

We are familiar with death, that of family, friends and acquaintances, increasingly so as we grow older. Yet while we, as it were, mourn on Holy Saturday the fate and death of our Saviour, there is incredible comfort in the faith-inspired thought that just as Christ would emerge victorious from such an abyss of silence and emptiness, so the same glorious destiny awaits all who believe in him.

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