

The Silence of Holy Saturday

What is happening? Today there is a great silence over the earth, a great silence and stillness, a great silence because the King sleeps. (Office of Readings for Holy Saturday)

All too often the silence of Holy Saturday is swept away by the need to get things ready for the Easter Vigil. It is sometimes said that, in our celebration of the Liturgy, we leave no room for silence, for the mystery of God's action in our lives to be treasured and pondered upon. How might we remedy this? Where does Holy Saturday fit our celebration of the Paschal Mystery?

'Father, we now celebrate this memorial of our redemption. We recall Christ's death, his descent among the dead, his resurrection, and his ascension to your right hand' (Eucharistic Prayer IV). Both in popular theology and in popular spirituality we tend not to dwell on the meaning of Jesus' descent among the dead. This is to be regretted since it is in this manifestation of solidarity between Christ and the dead that we come to understand something of the 'height and depth' of the love of Christ made manifest through the Incarnation.

For the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar any attempt to move too quickly from the last breath of the dying Christ to the empty tomb on the morning of the first day of the week runs the risk of leaving us untouched by the 'magic of Holy Saturday' which is the mystery of the silence of God. On Holy Saturday the Church waits at the tomb, meditating on his suffering and death, meditating on the fact that 'for our sake God made the sinless one into sin' so that through the loving obedience of the sinless one we might become the goodness of God.

Whereas up until the reforms of 1951 the celebration of the Easter Vigil was held early on Saturday morning, the Liturgy now invites us to respect the silence which belongs to the tomb; a silence which speaks most eloquently of the love of the Father, for it is his Word who lies silenced. The Church waits, therefore, in silence for the message of the angel which announces the victory of the love of the Father over the power of sin and death; *'Why look among the dead for one who is alive? He is no longer here; he is risen!'* (Luke 24:5)

The descent of Christ into death lies at the very heart of the Paschal Mystery. Jesus truly died. He passed from this life and entered into 'the place of no return' (Job 10:21). The Church professes this in the Apostles' Creed with the words 'descended into hell.' For von Balthasar, the state of Christ in his descent, however, is not that of the glorious Lord but rather as one 'bereft of strength' (Ps 88:4). The death of Christ upon the cross strips him of all authority and renders him truly powerless; 'down among the dead, among those slaughtered in their graves, among those you remember no more, those deprived of your protecting hand' (Ps 88:5)

For von Balthasar, such a passivity and powerlessness on the part of the dead Christ is both natural and in accordance with the Scriptural presentation of the resurrection, which is act and gift of the Father! *'But you killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead'* (Acts 3:14). Von Balthasar insists that we should see in the very fact of the Son of God having died and entered into complete solidarity with humanity in the state of death an eloquent sermon in itself; it is an active passivity.

Was it necessary that Christ should suffer and die? For the Jewish mind death was the punishment for disobedience and wrongdoing. As Paul writes (Romans 5:12), *'Sin entered the world through one man, and through sin death, and thus death has spread through the whole human race because everyone has sinned'*. However in the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer we pray *'Even when we disobeyed you and lost your friendship, you (Father) did not abandon us to the power of death. Father, you so loved the world that in the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Savior.'*

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews claims that Jesus was one 'who had to taste death for everyone' (1:9), yet the significance of this word 'death' may not be confined solely to the physical sphere but also refers to that spiritual death which is the separation from the living God which is caused by sin. The power of sin and death which is this separation of men and women from God had held sway over mankind since the time of Adam, and it is in the very person of Jesus that this is brought to an end; *'For as in Adam all men die, so even in Christ shall all be made alive'* (1 Cor 15:22). This being made alive, the fruit of the action of Christ, is the reconciliation of

mankind with God, a reconciliation which is won only through Christ's death in which *'he was bearing our faults in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness'* (1 Peter 2:24)

The Gospels portray the whole of Jesus' life as a mission which he has received from the Father and which he accepts from his Father in loving obedience. The Scriptures constantly present the person of Jesus as being in full conformity with the will of his Father. *'Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.'* (Philippians 2:6-7)

Many times in the work of von Balthasar we find this text being taken as the expression of the obedient and self-emptying love of Christ. Nowhere is this more eloquently expressed than in the suffering and death of Jesus, where the constant cry *'thy will not mine'* allows the Father to reveal himself totally in the Son.

The journey of Jesus towards his death is something unrepeatable; not only do his disciples not understand his decision (Mt 16:21) but eventually they fall away, leaving him alone and it is this abandonment which is felt by Jesus on the cross - not merely the abandonment on the part of his disciples and friends, but also on the part of his Father. Having first washed his disciples' feet as a sign of love and service, and having given them his very self in the gift of the Eucharist, Jesus is prepared to begin in obedience the passion which will lead to his death. It is in the garden of Gethsemane that this passion has its beginning and the picture is perhaps most movingly portrayed by Mark; *'And sudden fear came over him and great distress.... And going on a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if possible, this cup might pass him by. 'Abba', he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. But let it be as you, not I, would have it'* (Mk 15:34-36).

Reflecting upon this particular passage, von Balthasar writes a long and very intense passage in his work "Heart of the World":

'Is fear finally coming over you? - a fear men know nothing about? I don't mean fear of something impending, some definite catastrophe. For such fear is limited: it has its object and man's consciousness is directed to that object. And, with us men, hope always remains an inseparable companion of fear; what you suffer is shapeless fear. It is a sea of fear without shores, fear-in-itself. The fear which is the core of sin. The fear of God and his inescapable judgment. The fear of hell. The fear of never again seeing the face of the Father for all eternity.

"Father", you cry out, "if it is possible... but now it is not even possible. Every fragment and shred of possibility has disappeared. You cry into the void "Father!", and the echo resounds. The Father has heard nothing. You have sunk too low into the depths; how are those up in heaven still to hear you?"

At first glance, this passage might strike us as strange, perhaps even a little perturbing. Does it seek to present a Jesus who, in Gethsemane and throughout his Passion, fears for the salvation of his soul? We remember that the punishment for human sin was not only the death of the body but the privation of the vision of God.

Calvin wrote that if he were asked exactly when Jesus' experience of hell began, he would say that it began in the Garden of Gethsemane. To prove the boundless nature of his mercy and love, Jesus is prepared to undergo not only physical death but also to come face to face with that 'second death' which is separation of the sinner from the living God; *'and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross'* (Philippians 2:7-8). And so the Son is seized by civil and religious authorities and sentenced to death and is looked on by the crowds *'as someone punished, struck by God and brought low...'* (Isaiah 53:4). However, in conformity with the picture of the Suffering Servant as presented by the Prophet Isaiah, the early writers interpret the sufferings of Jesus as justifying many (Is. 53:11), for on the cross *'ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried, he was pierced through for our sins ... offering his life in atonement'* (Is. 53:11).

The crucifixion and death of Jesus is seen in the mystical writings of Adrienne von Speyr as one great act of Confession on the part of Jesus. Just as Jesus bears in himself the faults of many, so on the cross these sins are offered to the Father for forgiveness; *'the suffering on the cross is, for all of us, Confession made by the Lord*

before the Father. Burdened with the sins of us all, he bears this burden before his Father, making penance for us all'.

By dying on the cross and by yielding up his spirit to the Father (Lk 23:46), Jesus perfects that solidarity with mankind which he took upon himself at the Incarnation. He becomes *'like one among the dead'* (Ps 88:5) and this solidarity of Jesus with those who have died is expressed by his oneness in the solitude of *Sheol*. When Christ descends into death, we are to understand that he enters into solidarity with all those who had died; he shared with them the experience of separation from God. His resurrection, which is the work of the Father, gives *'light to those who sit in darkness and the shadows of death'* (Lk 1:79). If the death of Christ can be seen as one great act of confession, then the Resurrection may be interpreted in terms of the Father's absolution and forgiveness of those sins which were borne by the Son on the cross; 'The cross, considered in this way, is nothing other than a great act of Confession made by the Son on our behalf; with the Resurrection, absolution from the Father is received. Easter is the forgiveness by God the Father of all the sins which the Son carried with him to the cross. In this way the Son has experienced and lived the act of Confession before he instituted it for us, the true sinners, as a Sacrament. In its sacramental expression, it is nothing less than what the Son experienced and won for us by the Cross'.

This is the attempt of one theologian to grasp what is entailed by our belief and profession of faith in a God who knows what it is to be human, to suffer, and finally to die and experience that solitude and separation from God which is caused by sin. The belief of the Church is that we have a High Priest who is *'not incapable of feeling our weaknesses with us; for we have one who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin'* (Heb 4:14). Holy Saturday is therefore a day on which the Church celebrates that total solidarity of God with mankind in the person of Jesus Christ, and also reflects upon that love of the Father which will not spare his only Son but which will give him up for the salvation of mankind.

In the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, death is to be seen as the final free act of mankind; 'it is our life's profound bow...before the Creator's throne'. There is no law of justice which demands that God should redeem mankind through the shedding of the blood of the Beloved – it is graciousness and freedom and love on the part of the Father which is at the heart of the Paschal Mystery.

The obedience shown by the Son to the will and mission received from the Father is rooted in this love, and upon the perfection of mutual love which is the life of the Trinity. It is in the life-giving Spirit that Jesus offers the perfect sacrifice to God (Heb 9:14). The solidarity which was lived by Jesus is brought to its perfection when his act of self emptying takes him to the grave and to the state of the powerless ones.

As the American Trinitarian theologian John O'Donnell writes: 'Christ embraces not only finite time but sinful time as well. He embraces the human condition of the sinner so radically that he descends even into the realm of the dead. In embracing even the 'no time' of hell, Jesus redeems sinful time from within. Even the irrevocable past of sin is given a new future. Hell, which is precisely the absence of all possibilities and the land of complete hopelessness, is given the possibility of resurrection. The man condemned by sin to repeat his past gifted to become the new creation.'

*'O generous love! That he who smote
in man for man the foe,
the double agony in man,
for man should undergo;'*

Such a mystery and majesty of such generous love, even in the silence of the grave, calls us too to reflect and adore in silence...the silence of Holy Saturday.

