

Holy Saturday Sermon

Psalm 142; Hosea 6.1-6; John 2.18-22

Biblical accounts of what took place between Christ's crucifixion and the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning are very brief – and yet around them has grown up a rich set of traditions and practices.

By the second century AD, that is, within a few generations of Jesus' death, it was widely established that the disciples and Jesus' family had held a vigil in front of his tomb in the hours following his burial. In memory of this first vigil, early Christians would fast rigorously from nightfall on Good Friday until dawn on Easter Morning, a period of about 40 hours, suggesting, of course, the 40 days of Lent. It was to be kept as a time of mourning, for the events of Good Friday, and of hopeful expectation, for the events of Easter Sunday. The practices with which Holy Saturday was marked were intended to capture both these qualities: severe fasting to evoke the need to mourn and the lighting of candles and lamps to evoke the spirit of hopefulness.

I am not the first to have noticed how the regulations of the last few weeks have inflicted on us an unexpectedly severe kind of Lenten observation. We have not been forced to fast, like those early Christians, but we have lost in part or in whole our ability to socialise, to work, to study, to shop, to visit cafés and restaurants and to travel. These are limitations far more acute than the vows most of us began this season with. They may have been involuntary but, nevertheless, the courage and fidelity with which they have mostly been followed gives them a moral and spiritual force similar, I think, to a Lenten fast.

These limitations, like the disciplines of Holy Saturday, are not kept for their own sake. Indeed, Holy Saturday has much to teach us about the nature of these observations and, in particular, the way they look both backwards and forwards, to Friday and Sunday, to mourning and to hoping.

We are in a time of mourning. The bell is tolling loudly across Italy, China and Spain, and we must hear it because it tolls for souls like ours and they need our prayers.

We are also in a time of hopefulness. The tokens for this hopefulness are all around us, in the care of doctors and nurses, in the steadfastness of checkout assistants and street cleaners, in the Zoom meetings that have punctuated the last few weeks like stars in the night sky, in the practices of social distancing with which we affirm our care not only for the vulnerable, but for also one another.

As in every crisis, we have seen acts of selfishness and of generosity, of greedy panic buying and offers of help to those for whom shopping has become a deadly risk. We have affirmed again how reliant we are on one another, vulnerable to one another's coughs and carelessness, dependent on one another's kindness and care. We have seen in the vulnerability of the old and the sick, our own power to harm or to save through the rigour with which we wash our hands and stay at home. We are, as John Donne famously put it, part of one continent.

The reading we just heard from Hosea is full of Friday and Sunday themes brought together, the combination of pain and healing, death and life:

He has torn us to pieces

but he will heal us;

he has injured us

but he will bind up our wounds.

After two days he will revive us;

on the third day he will restore us

There is nothing contradictory about fear and hopefulness. A theme that has come up time and again in my Lent Groups and during Bible study is that, during the-Covid-19 virus, faith has been like a rock in a choppy ocean. The psalm we heard this morning reminds us that there is only and always one secure place to put our feet: 'I cry to you, Lord; I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.'

This security is the source of our hopefulness – and ours is a faith practiced in hopefulness: the hopefulness of the coming of Jesus, the hopefulness of forgiveness and reconciliation, the hopefulness of the Resurrection.

Tomorrow's dawn will not bring the end to our unexpectedly severe Lent: this Easter Sunday will carry more of Good Friday with it than most. But it will intensify us in our hopefulness, remind us of the faithfulness of God, bring us back to his Resurrection, life in the midst of death.

Dawn is a good metaphor for our faith: it is why churches are built facing east, it is why we gather at the break of day on Easter morning, it is why it figures again and again in the psalms. The reading from Hosea, chosen for today and appropriate for the springtime, brings us precisely to the hopefulness of the dawn:

As surely as the sun rises,

he will appear;

he will come to us like the winter rains,

like the spring rains that water the earth.

Amen.