

Sermon Good Friday 2020

My dear friends, near and far, you do not need me to tell what a peculiar place we now find ourselves in. How strange it is to not have you here. How strange it is for us to not share these days with each other. How strange it is that I speak to you in this manner! We inhabit, now, a strange country, a foreign land. And this strangeness reverberating across the globe. Normally, of course, we would spend Holy Week in church for a long time, every day. It is a time of intensity and mystery and of indescribable joy. But this year it has been taken from us. Now, the greatest witness we can have to the world at this time is to show that we have humbly accepted the thing that means the most to us as a Christian family — our celebration of the Easter mysteries — so that lives might be saved, and the world rid of this plague. We *can* do this for the world. Nobody is asking us to deny our faith, but rather to make an unusual, and unusually painful, sacrifice. Through it, we will know in a way we never have, the meaning of the crucified Jesus's words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

As an icon, if you like, of the strangeness of this time, note that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem built over the site where Jesus died, was buried, and was resurrected, has been closed for the first time since the Black Plague, in the 14th century? This emptiness and silence an icon inviting us to think about the deeper lesson here. The question that has to be on every Christian's mind is, *What is God trying to tell us in this?* Is it a chastisement? A warning? A portent of a time to come when we may be forbidden to go to Church? What? In these days of silence and separation we would do well to ponder these questions. The strange uncertainty of these days, the profound sense of loss we feel bids us to make our way with the faithful disciples of our Lord to his tomb. And there in the darkness, in the silence, to pray, to listen and to wait in hope.

The Passion Narratives in all the gospels recount how, as Jesus moves towards his death, a growing silence envelopes him. No miracles. No mighty work. Even no great word. In the Gospel of John, which we have just heard, it is remarkable how few words are actually spoken by our Lord. And this from a gospel where whole chapters are given over to our Lord's sayings. But at the pinnacle, the climax of his life, the end of his life, he is essentially mute. And this silence secured for a time by placing Christ in the tomb: *Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There they laid Jesus...*

It is no accident that the evangelist notes the place of Jesus burial as being in a *garden*, and that it is a *new* tomb. Both these ideas suggest that the darkness, coldness and silence that covers Christ are *charged with potential*. The scene is being set if you like for a creation story, or more properly a re-creation story! In Genesis we hear how God forms man *out* of the earth and breathes life into him. When the breath is taken from Christ he is placed *in* the earth. Christ takes our flesh, and so also the dust from which we are made. In his death he enters – literally – the earth, the dust. And in this dust the seed of new life is planted. In the gospel imagination, then, the tomb is not the place of despair. It is the place where life germinates. It is, if you like, a womb.

This is an idea not lost on the Evangelists. In Luke at least, Jesus at his birth is wrapped in cloths and laid in manger. At his death wrapped in a cloth and laid in a tomb. In the gospel imagination womb and tomb, life and death speak to and inform each other. This most basic of polarities joined in Christ. Yes, in Adam our innocence and life are lost in the garden. But in Christ laid in a new tomb, in a garden, innocence and life *restored* from the garden. This tomb is Eden! The tomb even in its silence, even in its darkness, even in its uncomfortable dread, is the place of new creation.

The latent *potential* of this strange, peculiar place we see play out in the figures of Joseph and Nicodemus. From various accounts these are men who up to now had been fearful, secret and half-hearted in their commitment to Christ. But at the tomb they show that they have been transformed. Now acting in *public*, now *no longer in fear*, they minister to the broken body of our Lord. This ministry at the tomb, this presence at the tomb is for them *transformative*. It calls out from them greater faith.

Deepening in the Christian life so often occurs in the quiet, dark places of our lives. Christian faith is certainly *not* all about the spectacular, the dramatic and the wonderful. This enforced sabbath rest, this enforced time of Jubilee, when all the land must rest and recover; this time when we all must stop, when we must all be still, when we must give up all the superficialities and superfluities which normally crowd our life and so crowd out God: in this strange time *God is speaking to us*. We will hear him if *we stay* and wait in this awkward, uncomfortable, unsettling place. Allow *this* to be a moment of transformation. Don't run away from the tomb! Stay there, wait there to see what new thing, what new life God might be offering us. Amen.