

Welcome to our Holy Saturday service. Saturday is the strangest of days in Holy Week. It is the day of vigils, of silent waiting, of grief, of poetry. It is only the in-between day for us, between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, because we know that tomorrow is Easter Sunday. But we are asked to enter into the story as if for the first time, we asked to wait in grief, in loss, in darkness.

This is the Holy Saturday to bring our uncertainties to the story as if we were hearing it for the first time. We all probably have many questions playing on our minds. Will I catch the virus? Will I or someone I love die? We might come tonight in the deepest of despair or in the pain of grief, come broken hearted as Mary his mother and his friends did. We might come having sat in silence for there were no use for words. In grief and fear we maybe know the terror of that cry from the cross, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me'.

That is a prayer in the truest of forms, from the heart, from the guts.

Let us start by turning to God in prayer, God of mercy, as we have travelled this Holy Week from triumphant crowds to painful death, we have done so separated from each other. Bring us close to each other and to you this evening. Draw up the emotions that bubble up inside us tonight, maybe those that twist our stomachs, or that gnaw at our insides, draw them out and bring us your peace. Help us settle into your ways.

You Son was tried as a blasphemer, was condemned to death as a rebel, and cried from the cross My God, My God, why have you forsaken me. He died a blasphemer, a rebel and godforsaken.

We knew the times that we have turned from your word, the times we have strayed from your ways and the times we have cursed your seeming absence and indifference.

If your son died as godforsaken, and a rebel and a blasphemer he must have died for the godforsaken, for the rebels and for the blasphemers. He must have died for me, for us.

Receive our prayers of repentance and shower us with the mercy of your forgiveness. Lead us back to your love and let us walk in the light of the Son of righteousness.

And hear us as we say the prayer which he taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts

as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power,
and the glory for ever.

Amen.”

There was not a settled idea on the afterlife in Jesus' Judaism. How could the early church make sense of Jesus, the Son of God who was faithful to God to the end, dying such a shameful, painful death? Matthew's Gospel has the seeds of that understanding. It will be expanded in the Apostles Creed. In the creed we proclaim that on Holy Saturday Jesus descended into hell. This is the day of the harrowing of hell, harrowing the Old English word for robbing. Jesus robbed hell.

Jesus robbed hell, or Sheol, robbed it of all the righteous ones who had lived for justice and died from injustice, died before lived and died in the same way. If the resurrection is best shown by artists and poets, so too is Jesus robbing hell of its unjust claim on those who had gone before, those who sleep, waiting for Him to awaken them.

Matthew 27

45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." 48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. 49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."

50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

The four Gospels say that the huge curtain that separated the Holy of the Holys, from the rest of the temple, the curtain that kept the ordinary folks out, that reserved that special place for the priests, it was torn in two. Jesus' crucifixion tears open the curtain that keeps the ordinary folks out.

Jesus' death proclaimed that there was no barrier between the people and God, all that prevents us from approaching God is ourselves.

Jesus' crucifixion also pulls back the curtain to reveal what empires do. They crush the ordinary folks, they treat them as dispensable; they dominate and murder and hold onto power at all costs. They twist the truth and hide in plain sight that empires are never for those they rule over. Love clashed with the power of empires, and love goes on clashing with the powers of empires.

Matthew says that it was not just the curtain that was torn open. The earth shook and the rocks were split. The very foundation of the earth was opened. And the tombs were open, the bodies of the saints who had been sleeping were awakened. The holy city, with the temple dominating it, now this city was populated by the risen.

The Holy thief plunders hell. Jesus did not rise alone. But he did not do much on his own. He prayed on his own, and he died on his own. They are two things that we cannot turn to others to do for us. Yes, we can and are held up in other's prayers when it is just too hard for us pray. And yes, it is comforting for the person and for those who grieve to have someone there at the end. But prayer and death are ours alone to do. But that was all he did on his own.

He travelled with his ragbag group of companions, travelled to Jerusalem with them. He was taken from the cross and hurriedly buried before the sun set by secret followers in the shadow of the twilight. It is not us without God nor God without us. And it is not us who wait for God, but God who waits for us. God calls us by name, and God calls us His own, and waits for us.

Let us hear the poetry of a Christian hymn from the end of the first century, from the Odes of Solomon. In this poem Christ addresses the faithful.

I was not rejected although I was considered to be so, and I did not perish although they thought it of me.

Sheol saw me and was shattered, and Death ejected me and many with me.

I have been vinegar and bitterness to it, and I went down with it as far as the depth.

Then the feet and head it released, because it was not able to endure my face.

And I made a congregation of living among his dead; and I spoke with them by living lips; in order that my word may not fail.

And those who had died ran towards me; and they cried out and said, "Son of God, have pity on us.

And deal with us according to your kindness, and bring us out from the chains of darkness.

And open for us the door by which we may go forth to you, for we perceive that our death does not approach you.

May we also be saved with you, because you are our Saviour."

Then I heard their voice, and placed their faith in my heart.

And I placed my name upon their head, because they are free and they are mine.

Those lovely lines that end the poem, I placed my name upon their head, because they are free, and they are mine. Called and called home. We still use those powerfully descriptive phrases to think of those we have loved and have died. They are the great 'cloud of witnesses', they are the 'communion of saints'.

Our everyday saints, and companions on the way, now comforted by the Holy thief, whose death tore the dividing curtain between us and God, whose death shook the earth and split the rocks. The one who plundered Hell that Holy Saturday.

I would like to return to the poetry of Padraig O' Tuama. From the poetry of the first century to a poem from a few years ago. Padraig's poem is simply called 'Go to Hell'.

He is called to Hell, this man

He is called to glory

He knows well these twisted ways

And those who've lost their story

He is called to clay, this man

He is called to yearning

He has heard of hidden streams

That heal those tiered of burning

He's searching out those raised in Hell

He wants to know the things they know

He believes in dreamland

Where the ragged people go

He is called to quiet, now

He is called to silence

To squat down on the breaking ground

With those who've swallowed violence

He is called to anguished thoughts

He is called to flowers

To find in Hell's own lonely fury

That which no flame devours

I saw him on the midway path

I saw he carried two things only

On his trip to Hell, this man

He is called to story.

