

EASTER TRIDUUM reflections with Fr Matt Blake, OCD - *Easter Saturday*

3rd April 2021, at the Carmelite Church¹, Kensington

What I want to reflect upon is something of the meaning of this day. Yesterday we celebrated Good Friday, the death of Jesus, and I focussed particularly on the conversation between Jesus and Pilate, looking at the theme of kingship and power and truth. I moved on to look at Edith Stein's reflection on the Science of the Cross, the wisdom of God revealed to us, and the person's capacity to know that and to live by that. Now, what we have come to today is the journey from death to life, this transition that there is from the death of Jesus to the resurrection. Jesus dies and rises, but there is a journey in between. And that journey is what I want to enter into this afternoon. I want to begin with a passage from Mark's gospel. Jesus has died and the centurion has said that *truly, this is the Son of God*. The centurion gives testimony to the true identity of Jesus as Son of God.

Now, what comes next? *There were some women watching from a distance, among them were Mary of Magdala, Mary who was the mother of James the Younger and Jossset, and Salome. These used to follow him and look after him when he was in Galilee and there were many other women there who had come up to Jerusalem with him.* So we meet these women who have been there, part of the gospel story in the background, but now they really come to the fore, in this time of transition. We find them here, we find them again at the burial of Jesus and of course we find them at the resurrection. They will enter the tomb, they will meet the young man there dressed in white, they will be the first to proclaim the good news of the resurrection. So let's just reflect on these women: they are followers of Jesus, they are disciples of Jesus, they have gone on this whole journey of discipleship from Galilee, travelled with him, they have obviously been with him throughout the whole experience, in other words, they have lived the life of a Christian, of a follower of Jesus. We don't hear anything that they say, they are silent, they are a silent presence. Some people might suggest that it was the culture of the time, women didn't speak and were kept in the background. So be it, but there's another way of looking at it, and that's why it's so relevant to today: what these women are doing, they are entering more deeply into silence. Silence and solitude is what today is all about. We are gone beyond words and are gone to a place where only silence can speak to us. So these women by their silence bear witness to what is really needed to be a follower of Jesus, an entering into deep contemplative silence and that's what the church does today, that's the whole experience of Holy Saturday. From after the death of Jesus, the church goes silent until the great Easter Vigil tonight, and the Easter Vigil begins with this journey out of darkness into light, but we, as a church, have gone through this great silence and the women here represent the great silence, they are our forerunners, we could say, in faith – they show us the way.

I'm reminded of a passage from St Teresa's writings from Chapter 40 of *The Book of her Life* and I quoted something from that chapter yesterday, speaking about Truth. Here, Teresa is at the end of the story of her life, and she speaks about herself as being at the boundaries, at the border of something – she doesn't know what, she doesn't know how to express this. Somehow Jesus is revealing himself to her, she has a sense of something much deeper, but she can't put words to it, she speaks of it as a boundary, a border, and of course that is where we are today, we're at a border, we are at the boundaries, the boundaries of death and life, the boundary of heaven and

earth, the boundary of believing in Jesus and not believing in him, of light and darkness, of truth and falsity, as we saw yesterday. And there are so many other ways we can express this, we are there at the boundary, we are somehow in between. We are in a conversation, an encounter that is so profound, that is beyond words, but Teresa is speaking about it in terms of this being her experience, and she goes on to say that from her experience far more women have this experience than men. This is interesting. She goes on to say she discussed this with Peter of Alcantara – a canonised saint and a close friend of Teresa’s – and he explained this to her and he gave her, she tells us, many reasons why this was so. She doesn’t tell us the reasons that he gave, but she says it was her experience also that far more women experience this or can go here, and that seems to be what Mark’s gospel is telling us.

The male disciples have run away, deserted Jesus – most of them will come back. But there are some: obviously there’s the centurion, who becomes a disciple; there is Joseph of Arimathea whom we will meet a few moments later, who will give a burial to Jesus; there is the man dressed in white that they will meet in the tomb. (Luke’s gospel tells us that this is an angel, but Mark doesn’t – it is a man dressed in white, which of course is the dress of a newly baptised Christian). So there are men here, but there’s this large group of women who have followed Jesus, who are true followers of Jesus. St Teresa tells us that every true Christian spiritual life brings us to the Cross – this is the point that every true Christian spiritual life brings a person to. So these women are held up to us here as the example of true Christians, of true followers of Jesus; and the following of Jesus takes us beyond anything that can be put into words, anything that can be tangibly expressed in terms of this world, it takes us to a place where only silence and solitude speak. Though there’s obviously a group of these women and a leadership group among them – we’re given the names of a few of them – we’re given the impression that there’s a whole large group of them, but each one of them is living something profound deep within. They are, we could say, the first true followers of Jesus and they show us the way to the place where today takes us, and it is into deep silence and solitude. That’s where the church goes to today and that is where we are brought to.

The resurrection doesn’t just happen. There is the death and the resurrection. There is something in between, or indeed the resurrection happens without there being any knowledge of it, because what they discover is that it has happened. The resurrection is something so mysterious that it is across the border, we could say – to use Teresa’s language – it’s at the other side of the border. It’s not an experience of this world but is an experience that is purely and totally spiritual. In spiritual terms we can speak about it in terms of contemplation. I’m reminded of St John of the Cross’s definition of contemplation, or definition of what he calls the *dark night*, which is a very similar reality, which is, as he tells us, *an inflow of God into the soul*. But we could also define what we are speaking about now as an inflow of God into this world, into human life, into human experience. It is the body of Christ, the Church, the presence of God in our world experiencing the very depths of contemplation; this inflow of God that John of the Cross tells us plunges the person, the soul, into a dark night, into deepest darkness. And that of course is what has happened here. The death of Jesus, his whole life, incarnation, everything, the whole time that Jesus has spent in this world is – to use John of the Cross’s terminology – is a great *inflow of God* into our world, it’s a great *inflow of God* into human history, into the human story and it does what John, when he speaks about what contemplation, says this inflow of God does:

it purifies, changes, transforms the person and it plunges it into deepest darkness, into deepest mystery. And that's what we're brought into today and that's what the whole world, the whole of human experience is plunged into today. Today we are taken to the boundaries, to the borders of the most profound experience in human history, that's what we can say that today is. We are taken into the deepest dark night of human history, into the deepest place that God's presence in this world brings humanity, because Jesus has become part of human history, part of the human story and therefore today he brings us there.

In the Apostles Creed, here's how it is expressed – that Jesus died, that he descended into hell, that he rose from the dead. What might be meant by *he descended into hell*? What is hell? Hell is where Jesus is today, if we want to put it like that, see it in those terms. Hell is the deepest darkness, the place that is the complete opposite or furthest away from God. It is the place where the most abandoned are, the most forgotten, the most neglected. Jesus goes to those furthest away today, Jesus goes to the furthest place any human being can be from God, he goes to the most abandoned. Wherever hell is, whatever hell may mean, whatever the world of the dead may mean, that's where he goes. It is the final statement that Jesus died. Remember the way that it's put in the gospels. If we were to look at Mark's gospel or indeed any of the gospels, there's a great emphasis put upon the fact that Jesus really did die. That's so important in the message. Pilate questions: *is Jesus really dead?* and the centurion has to go and stick a spear into his side and blood and water come out. It is verification that Jesus really is dead – this is not pretend dead, this is not partly dead, or that he's resuscitated again, no, he truly is dead and he's put into the tomb, and had we read a bit more of Mark's gospel we'd see that these same women are witnesses to the tomb. He's put into the tomb and there's a big stone put in front of the tomb, making sure that he really is dead and buried. But, as understood from earliest times in Christianity he went further than that. He doesn't just physically die, but spiritually he goes to the place of the dead, he goes to a place of solidarity, of oneness with all that have died. He descends into hell, he shares the experience, the fate, of all who have died before him – and after, all of us. He shares fully and totally in the experience of death. There is no experience of death, there is no dimension of death that Jesus does not experience. That seems to be something very important for the gospel writers and for the early church and indeed for the whole story of Christianity. He has truly died, including going to the furthest place of abandonment that the dead can find themselves in. And of course, wherever Jesus is, there is no death, there is life. So in a sense we can say that the resurrection begins from the place of deepest darkness, of furthest abandonment. And it is that mystery, that extraordinary mystery of life and death, what it means to cross that boundary, what it means to make this journey, that we reflect upon today, that today is all about. Whatever the experience in our lives may be, whatever the darkness may be, that's where God meets with us.

Our world, as we have it at these times is suffering under the shadow, the darkness, of the Covid pandemic. How might that relate with today? What might today's mystery have to say to our world today? Jesus Christ, who was born, who lived, who died, who shared the suffering and pain and the whole experience of death, shared that with so many people, the whole human condition. Today is the day when Jesus enters into total solidarity with all of vulnerable humanity. As we pray and contemplate what today means, let us hold within us, let us carry with us the pain and suffering of our whole world. Jesus went and spent today in solidarity with all those who are furthest

away, all those who were in darkness, all those who were abandoned, all those who were in hell, whatever hell may be, whether hell is in the next life or all the many hells of this life, that's where Jesus is today. We can't see it.

Today is the day when, like these women, we simply have to wait in silence. The women aren't waiting in an empty silence; they are waiting in a silence in which they are finding strength. What if we were to meet these women and have a conversation with them? If we were to ask them *Why did you stay? Even Peter isn't here; even the twelve that he chose aren't around. Why are you staying? What's keeping you here?* I expect they wouldn't be able to put it into a rational explanation. But my guess – and it's more than a guess, because this is the answer we find in St Teresa, St John of the Cross and so many of the mystics down through the centuries, and it's a very simple answer, *I have to be here, we just have to be here. This is the only place to be.* Somehow or other these women have a strength, their very presence is showing a strength that can only come from God. These women are living the experience of Jesus at a very profound spiritual level. It is a strength that comes from deep within. That's what enables them to stand at the foot of the Cross, that's what enables them to have the courage to stay there, that's what enables them – I carefully use the word *believe*, because we mustn't see that in some superficial way – it's not a believing in the sense of believing in one's head; it is a very dark, deep interior faith that enables them to be there. It enables them to stay there, it enables them to wait, it enables them to make this journey, however long this journey is going to be – and we mustn't naively think it's only twenty four hours or a little bit more, this is a lifetime. Holy Saturday is a lifetime. Holy Saturday, in a sense, is the whole Christian life, it is the whole Christian life lived in faith, it is what it means to live the life of faith very deeply, or to use John of the Cross's terminology, to live the dark night. And it is what brings the person very closely, intimately, into the life of Jesus, but it also brings the person into very close and deep solidarity with our suffering world. These women who could stand at the foot of the Cross can stand at the foot of every cross in our world. They can stand with, can stay with, can accompany suffering humanity. Wherever there is pain, wherever there is suffering, wherever there is darkness and abandonment, the faith, the love, the charity of these women and men is to be found.

Today then doesn't just bring humanity into the most profound experience of God, of Jesus Christ, that is possible, but it also brings humanity into the most profound experience of solidarity with each other that's possible. Jesus today is in solidarity, is at one with the most abandoned, and neglected and forgotten of humanity, whoever is in hell, whatever hell may be. And so it is with all those who have followed Jesus here, who have come here with him, who have accompanied him here, who have had the faith and the courage to stay, to be, to be in silence, to be in solitude.

There's an image that Jesus uses in the gospel to describe his life and that is the seed grain that goes into the earth that dies. We can see this as an image of the tomb. Jesus is put into the earth, into this rock, this tomb and shut in there with a big stone. He's gone into the earth, he's gone into the darkness, he has died. But he said the wheat grain that dies brings new life, new life is born out of death. The place of death, the place of darkness is also the place of new life. Today, then, this Holy Saturday, we are, as Christians, as people of prayer, walking with Jesus on this journey from life to death to life. We are walking with him and we're walking with the whole of humanity. It is the day of the deepest human solidarity.

I want to look forward a bit now to tonight, tomorrow and the resurrection, and I want to do so in terms of looking at the people who are involved. One of the things about the stories of the resurrection that we get in the gospels is that they are all stories about people and people's experience of this. From these women who went into the tomb and met this strange man there, to the disciples whom Jesus appeared to, the various experiences of the risen Lord. But what we notice about all of them, if we look closely at the people, is that they have all had to make a journey of faith, no matter what they have lived up until now, no matter how closely they followed Jesus, and the first and foremost person we could say in all of this is Mary of Magdala. We're not told it in Mark's gospel, but we're told it elsewhere that when she meets Jesus, she doesn't recognise him. No matter how profound one's relationship with Jesus is – even these heroic women of the gospel story, the only people who can follow the whole experience, can stay there in silence, in solitude, even for them, the resurrection is a challenge. Mary of Magdala does not recognise him, thinks he's the gardener – *Where have you put him?* Somehow, in some mysterious way, we can see that another deeper journey of faith has to be entered on. What's told in a few lines, in a few words in the gospel can be, at the level of human experience, a lifetime – and a great challenge, requiring deeper and deeper levels of faith. The resurrection, even for those who are closest to Jesus, requires a deeper journey of faith.

One of the great examples of this is the story that Luke tells of these two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They don't recognise Jesus, yet they can talk about him and they can tell the stranger all about him and all the events that have taken place. And there's a huge lesson for us in this, we can tell people all about Jesus too, and all the events in the gospel and we might know them all, be familiar with them, year after year after year, but do we recognise Jesus? And do we recognise his presence now, and what he is doing at this moment in our lives? There is a huge lesson and a challenge to us all, here. And what he is doing in Easter 2021 when he joins us on the road that we are on, whether that's the road that we are on personally, or that we're on collectively as a church, or as the human race in the midst of the Covid pandemic, Jesus is walking beside us as he walked beside those disciples. They did not recognise him, and there are two things they have got to do in order to recognise him, in order to make this long journey. They've got to first tell their own story. We've got to tell our story today, the story that has brought us here. If we were to ask these women in Mark's gospel, *How did you get to here? How did you end up sitting beside this tomb? How did you end up there in the midst of all these soldiers? What's your story? What happened? How did he inspire you to leave your homes, your families and your work and do all of this and take this total crazy risk – what's your story?* What's our story? What story do we tell the stranger we meet on the road, what's the true story of our lives? – not the superficial one, but the deep one within. And the second thing that he does with these two disciples is to take them through the scriptures, we're told, through the whole journey of scripture. That must have taken years and years – our story and the scriptures. If we are to know the risen Lord we must know our story, the true story of our lives, who we really are, what our true and real story is, what St Teresa calls *self-knowledge*. Self-knowledge, she said, is always the beginning of the spiritual life, that's where we begin. The resurrection asks us, invites us, to look at our own lives again, look at our own lives in the light of the resurrection, because to encounter the risen Lord is to begin to live a whole new life. Who are we? Who am I?

St Teresa, when she's asked to write her *Life*, in writing that book tells us that Jesus becomes the living book for her. Perhaps we can put it a little more clearly than that: the presence of Jesus in her life becomes the living book. That of course is what happens to those disciples on the road to Emmaus, he becomes the book, he becomes the living book. He helps them to see the story of their lives as the story of his presence in their lives, he helps them to see that it is the scriptures that open up and shine a light on their lives and helps them to see who they are and who he really is. Then they can recognise him when bread is broken, then the Eucharist has meaning for them, then human solidarity has real meaning for them, true relationships have real meaning for them, what it means to live, what it means to live the fullness of life, what the new life, the resurrection, means to them.

So, when we reflect upon the resurrection, which tonight we will celebrate: if we think of it traditionally, we symbolically go from darkness into light. We symbolically go from the darkness of Holy Saturday, the darkness of the tomb, the darkness of human life and human existence, the darkness of hell, the darkness of abandonment, of alienation, of pain and suffering, the darkness of ill health, the darkness of our lack of understanding, our bewilderment into the light that is Jesus Christ. And that light of Jesus Christ takes us through a wonderful journey through the Word of God, those great readings which again we will only have a short extract from tonight, but they're there for us as our light. We journey through scripture with a whole new light, and we celebrate the light of baptism, and we come into the Eucharist and we go forward in our lives with a new light, with a new life.

The Easter vigil is the celebration of faith, of faith as a journey from darkness to light, from death to life, from ignorance to wisdom, from poverty to true wealth, from being restricted and compromised to true freedom – there are so many other words we could use to express this journey, this transition. So today, Holy Saturday, is the journey into resurrection, the preparation for resurrection, it is the journey into the deepest place within us and a journey into the deepest place where the Christian life is going to bring us to. As I said already, there is nowhere in human experience that Jesus, the Word become flesh, the Son of God incarnate, doesn't go. Neither is there anywhere that Christian life does not take us to, and most particularly, if we live the death and resurrection of Jesus spiritually, then what we are doing is we are living human life in its fullness, we are living human life in its greatest depth. Holy Saturday is necessary for us to live. Of all days of the year, today is the day we most need. The spirituality that underlies today is a spirituality that leads us to the fullness of life, it's leading us from death to life in every sense of those words, in every way that the truth of those words can be seen, understood and experienced. It is also the day that gives us the capacity to live and to journey with and accompany all those of our brothers and sisters in our world and all of creation, as we're told, that are on the journey to redemption and to fullness of life.

Wishing you a very Happy Easter, many, many blessings and may the risen Lord truly give you the fullness of healing, of grace, of mercy, of life. Amen.

¹ This Holy Saturday reflection was given by Fr Matt Blake and broadcast on video simultaneously from the Carmelite Church, Kensington and the Centre for Applied Carmelite Spirituality at Boars Hill. Transcribed by a member of the discalced Carmelite Secular Order. An audio recording is available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hukma7ast8DUCZpQFoGf5Apxiol-VSqC/view?usp=sharing>
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