MATERIAL FOR HOLY WEEK 2020

Holy Saturday – Luke 23.48-56

Yesterday we touched on the grief of the women as they watched Joseph of Arimathea take down the body of Jesus and lay it in the tomb. Today is a day when nothing can be done. "It is the Sabbath". In our world, where so little is closed, so little is different, that means so little to us. The 1949 Ealing Comedy "Whisky Galore" has the SS Cabinet Minister shipwrecked on the Hebridean island of Toddy. There is no whisky on this island, supplies have run out. The ship's cargo is whisky. The men prepare to launch their boats in the midsummer light of a Hebridean night, to go and salvage the whisky, and the clock bell strikes midnight. "It is the Sabbath". They go back to their homes.

Tomorrow morning, the women will go to the tomb. The spices are prepared, an anointing will take place, they will face, hold, the dead body of the man they love. We cannot imagine the extra strain that must have been added to their grief by the forced day of inaction.

We don't do in-action well - in a normal year Holy Saturday is probably the busiest day of the year in the life of our churches. The place is stuffed full of flower arrangers from an early hour. I know I am often rude about flower arrangers, but I love them really and I am always grateful for their hard work. One of the great joys of Easter is Holy Saturday Compline, when you sit in a beautiful church, surrounded by gorgeous flowers, but don't look yet. We need to face the reality of today, before we can celebrate the joy of tomorrow.

Death, thou wast once an uncouth hideous thing,

Nothing but bones,

The sad effect of sadder groans;

Thy mouth was open, but thou couldst not sing.

For we consider'd thee as at some six

Or ten yeares hence, After the loss of life and sense, Flesh being turn'd to dust, and bones to sticks.

We look'd on this side of thee, shooting short;

Where we did find

The shells of fledge souls left behind,

Dry dust, which sheds no tears, but may extort.

But since our Saviour's death did put some blood
Into thy face;
Thou art grown fair and full of grace,
Much in request, must sought for as a good.

For we do now behold thee gay and glad,
As at doomsday;
When souls shall wear their new array,
And all thy bones with beauty shall be clad.

Therefore we can go die as sleep, and trust

Half that we have

Unto an honest faithful grave;

Making our pillows either down, or dust.

Death, page 86

Death is a reality - more of a reality to Herbert and people in the seventeenth century, than it is to us. More death, more suffering, and not hidden away in a hospital or a hospice (though COVID19 is changing all that. There is so much pain this year). The groans, the bones, the open mouths. For Herbert, as a parish priest, death was a familiar acquaintance. No doubt, on many occasions, he had sat with dying and with death. No doubt the Sexton in his churchyard turned up bones as he dug a grave - I wonder how many people lie in the graveyards that surround our churches; men, women and children who sat and prayed in the churches where we (usually) sit and pray.

The first three verses of his poem are practical. The open mouth, the dust and bones, "the shells of fledge souls left behind" - empty egg shells, no more than that. "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return".

The last three verses take death in the context of Jesus' death and resurrection. "But since our Saviour's death did put some blood into thy face" - I have seen the difference a blood transfusion makes to someone very ill, bringing back their life and colour - Herbert would not have experienced that. But he can imagine how life can return to a dead face - Christ's death brings colour back to cheeks, because death brings us to the presence of God.

Death is "much in request", the recipient of many invitations, because death is now the pathway to life. We know many people who, as illness drags on, as the years pass by, are looking forward to death - sometimes simply because it will be an end to pain, suffering and tiredness, but for those of us with faith, that it will lead to something better.

Death is "gay and glad", something marvellous - it is a happy doomsday, when the dead rise again, when bodies are resurrected, when life is renewed, when we meet our loved ones again. A physical resurrection - "all thy bones with beauty shall be clad" (this in the days before cremation, when burial, when physical remains, can be re-clothed, renewed, come alive again. Our understanding of physical resurrection has changed in the last 400 years, but we still believe we will meet our loved ones again).

"We can die as sleep". In a normal Easter, Saturday is a long day and Sunday will be even longer. There is nothing better, at the end of a long day, than to stretch out, or to snuggle down under the duvet, bury your head on the pillow, and let sleep bring you the peace and healing you need. Christ has promised us, by his death and resurrection, that we will wake. Until them, whether our pillows are down or dust, we can rest in the Lord.

Like yesterday, we have a beautiful piece of music to reflect on something dreadful.

Ex Ore Innocentium

It is a thing most wonderful, Almost too wonderful to be, That God's own Son should come from heav'n, And die to save a child like me.

And yet I know that it is true: He chose a poor and humble lot, And wept, and toiled, and mourned, and died, For love of those who loved him not.

I sometimes think about the cross, And shut my eyes, and try to see The cruel nails and crown of thorns, And Iesus crucified for me.

But even could I see him die, I should but see a little part Of that great love, which, like a fire, Is always burning in his heart.

And yet I want to love thee, Lord; O light the flame within my heart, And I will love thee more and more, Until I see thee as thou art.

Words: William Walsham How, 1823-1897

Music: John Ireland, 1879-1962

 $\underline{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_t7b9qtMFI}$

The Choristers of Canterbury Cathedral