

Good Friday

Earlier this week I read in the Divine Office the following words

*O send forth your light and your truth,
let these be my guide;
let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.*

When I read the psalms, I always try to think of Jesus praying them with me. What did he make of these words? I wonder if he remembered them when he made the decision to go back to Judaea, to raise Lazarus from the grave; *the holy mountain* is Sion, Jerusalem. In the name of light and truth he returns to Lazarus, and the disciples look on with horror as the expected consequence unfolds; he is going back to a certain death.

Now we are on mount Calvary, and on it we find, not a place where God dwells, but a place where God dies. This is the answer to Jesus' prayer as he recited that psalm. God has answered his prayer in a terrifying way.

We can seek the meaning of this death in all kinds of ways. The wisest among us have sensed in it a love that can hardly be spoken of, because the ugliness and cruelty and finality of crucifixion is all our own work, and ought to disqualify us from speaking of love. The cross stands at the heart of a world where we do things this way; built on harsh exploitation and hunger for possession and power. This is our world, and God has been telling us for thousands of years to change our hearts, and we haven't. So silence is appropriate for us in front of the Cross. Christ is not simply suffering : he is speaking to us, and in him God is judging us, showing us what we're like.

But there is an ulterior working in this awful scene. Jesus knew that he wasn't trapped into the Cross by human politics. He knew it was going to happen; and he knew that the will of God was for him to suffer like this and to die. That makes the Cross, ultimately, an act of God and not ours alone. God's deeds are never negative, always revealing him, always shining with divine love. And we have recognised in this deed of God what we have called our redemption. It means that by the giving of his Son God bought us back and paid for us.

We asked in the University during Lent: *Who had us imprisoned, and to whom did God pay this astonishing price?* Some suggested that Jesus paid his Father to let us off the hook. That is nonsense; God would have to be an angry monster, like a huge sulking baby, unworthy of even our worship. Some suggested Satan; but why would God the Father give such sensational payment to Satan? That would be weak and contradictory language.

In the first book of the Bible, the divine wisdom speaks of the moment when we entered the business of evil. We decided to go it alone, to ignore the command of the Creator, and to choose our own way instead. In that moment *we stole ourselves from God*. This amazing verdict gave me the answer to my question. We had ourselves imprisoned, exiled from our true home, lonely and hopeless. That is the possession from which we are redeemed, and the ransom is paid to us. When we took him, and bound him, and condemned him, and handed him over to be treated in this terrible way, we were receiving from the Father his greatest gift. In his silence, in his total refusal of legions of angels, he shows us that we own him and can do what we like with him. There will be no thunderbolts, no revenge. The silence of God lets

us look on the face of his beloved son, to whom we have done such terrible wrong; and as we look on him, we remember the words with which he first appeared amongst us:

This is my beloved Son, in whom is all my joy.

The truth is that there is no place in Creation that is unreachable by God. The dead Christ shows us that God has come even to this dishonoured place, carrying into its darkness and despair the pure love of the Eternal. The resurrection is simply the statement that God's gift is not withdrawn, that all our power to hate and refuse is insufficient to blot out his love for us. God the Father is still our Father, and we shall have the courage quite soon to call on him by that eternal name; we sinners still have the Lord in our lives, and soon will receive him in our hands to be our food. In doing this we will in some way be reversing the verdict we passed on him, and receiving with due honour the exchanged gift that is the heart of the Trinity: the Father's gift to his beloved Son, the utter self-giving of the Son to the Father.

So let us turn our eyes to the Cross, which teaches us the depth of divine love for us, and let it turn our hearts from rebellion, to the intense love and gratitude which is the joyous destiny of all the sons and daughters of God.