

# The Holy Saturday Experience

*Dermot Power*

## *Light and Darkness*

IN A RECENT TV SERIES, *The Lakes*, a priest is confronted by a grieving mother who in the terrible loss of her little child wanted to hear that she would one day see her again in heaven. Instead the priest had only been able to speak about anger, the darkness and doubt around the death of the child. He said in his homily that he would not patronize the family by speaking about the light of eternal life or indeed the love of God – the only love available was that mediated through the support of family and friends. Any other kind of light, and especially that which comes with the love of God, was in eclipse. An interesting insight, I thought, into the nature of light and darkness in terms of the extremities of living and of the realities of suffering and death. The priest was speaking out of the abyss of the dark night, the woman was looking out and waiting for the dawn, both experiences unfolding from the crucible of pain. In this article I explore something of the Holy Saturday ‘vigil’ where the light has not yet pierced the darkness, and where the heart still remains in the eclipse where faith is no longer certainty but waiting, and even perhaps hoping against hope.

## *Holy Saturday – a non-event in the Triduum*

In the Christian understanding of the paschal mystery the liturgical celebrations from Holy Thursday to Easter Day move through darkness to light and through death to newness of living. Holy Saturday is where the process enters into a total eclipse, and entering into this sacred space is indeed a journey into darkness and uncharted territory. As part of the Easter Triduum Holy Saturday is something of a non-event. There is, of course, in the Office of Readings for that day the beautiful and stirring ancient homily on the harrowing of Hell. From the day before, in the liturgical spaces of our churches, there is a pervading sense of numbness and waiting, while behind the scenes is great busyness for the preparations essential to the smooth running of the vibrant Easter Liturgies and so, in this sense, life certainly goes on. There is, however, a very real, though neglected, theology and spirituality of Holy Saturday. It is particularly associated with the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, but as we

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shall see in this article, it also comes up quite surprisingly in other strands of theological reflection.

In this short piece I shall attempt to distil some of the categories of the spiritual theology of Holy Saturday and try to connect them with what might be appropriately described as 'Holy Saturday' experiences in everyday life. At first sight this might seem slightly far-fetched because Holy Saturday has to do with the mystery of Christ's descent into Hell, whatever that might mean. However, since we are now very used to speaking of 'Golgotha' experiences or even 'resurrection' experiences, it is hard to justify the exclusion of this intrinsic piece of logic of the paschal mystery.

### *No map for Holy Saturday in the depths of Sheol*

It is important to note from the very beginning that what we are engaged with is, at heart, an imaginative journey and exploration where there are no clear guidelines or even lines of direction. These are, by and large, uncharted waters and attempting to say something about the journey may not be part of what is familiar to us or, indeed, acceptable to us; Holy Saturday language is not yet part of polite theological or spiritual conversation.

Currently there is a whole range of popular spirituality that is clearly meeting real needs in people's lives. It is about finding a way through life's dark moments and it goes about doing it with confidence and skill. One of the characteristics of this kind of spiritual writing and, indeed, of the even more mainstream explicitly 'religious' writing that would be familiar to most of us who read *The Way*, is that it wants to map out in advance what the journey may feel or look like – stages and transitions known in advance help to illumine the path we all walk along. In a very concrete sense it is a packaged experience and one that fits in with so much that characterizes our culture. To be able to assemble, control, distil and orient information, even if it is data for the spiritual journey, is considered a good thing. It has deep roots within the Judaeo-Christian tradition which gives at times quite detailed maps of what might be expected if the journey ever took us into the desert or into exile. We like and we need maps, but on Holy Saturday what happens goes off the screen and the radar doesn't seem to work there. It is, therefore, a spirituality of what must seem to be a cul-de-sac. It is about losing the way and ending up 'nowhere'. It is not about the 'homecomings', 'still centres', 'profound silences' or 'rich encounters' of popular spirituality. It is about what cannot be

brought to prayer, to community. It is what cannot be made sense of, what we have lost and is now beyond our reach.

Holy Saturday as an event and as an image centres on what is unknown, the depths of Sheol, what is unarticulated and beyond our control. It is 'nowhere' in every sense of the word, Sacraments cannot be celebrated, the eucharist is redundant, the altars are stripped, and there is, or at least should be, a deafening silence in the sacred space. It can, therefore, touch life where life's experiences mirror these powerful liturgical images. It can contribute to a spirituality that moves beyond the polite confines of where life is rich in meaning and identity and goes into those places of abandonment and despair which is the Hell that Balthasar riskily speaks of as a christological place.

*A glimpse of Balthasar's Hell as a christological place*

According to Balthasar, Hell, as the most extreme space of final isolation and therefore of total darkness, is the place on Holy Saturday that Christ breaks into in a situation of co-solitude. Hence those of us who find ourselves there discover we are no longer ultimately alone, but in the company of the God-forsaken Son of God.

The lights do not suddenly go on, rather, the darkness is discovered as an experience that is shared. As Balthasar says,

Into this finality (of death) the dead Son descends, no longer acting in any way, but stripped by the cross of every power and initiative of his own, as one purely to be used, debased to mere matter, with a fully indifferent (corpse) obedience, incapable of any active solidarity – only thus is he right for any 'sermon' to the dead. He is (out of an ultimate love however) dead together with them. And exactly in that way he disturbs the absolute loneliness striven for by the sinner: the sinner, who wants to be 'damned' apart from God, finds God again in his loneliness, but God in the absolute weakness of love who unfathomably in the period of nontime enters into solidarity with those damning themselves.

*The Holy Saturday of Jesus*

For Balthasar the Holy Saturday experience should enjoy a theological status consistent with its position at this high point of the liturgical calendar. He believes that such a restoration provides an horizon for what is essential in the Christian revelation of the mystery of

God's relationship with those who experience abandonment or the descent into Hell. On Good Friday Jesus dies outside of the Holy Place, crucified and condemned in complete solidarity with the lost and the abandoned. The silence and the emptiness of the Holy Saturday experience is for Balthasar a necessary moment in the unfolding of the paschal mystery at its most redemptive and compassionate focus. It shows the path between cross and resurrection and that this path is often an experience of abandonment and of diminishment; it is why only a dull emptiness accompanies our human talking and thinking about this dimension of life.

What Balthasar centres on is Jesus' own unique experience of the dark night of the cross and the silence of the God he once called 'Father'. What constituted the Holy Saturday experience for Jesus was the infinite distance of the God who once was experienced as absolute closeness. All those who find themselves there in this separation too, find Jesus. Balthasar gives great weight to the accounts in the gospel where Jesus heard no answer from God in response to his question of abandonment. These depths of abandonment become the criteria of all our language about judgement and mercy, despair and hope, and question all our preconceived ideas about God and the possibility of the gift of the kingdom. Christ's experience of what it is to be in the Hell that defies all poetic or philosophical description is not, in Balthasar's vision, a legislative transcendence of tragedy and time, but an entering into the innermost structure of limitation and death. According to this vision, we need not be afraid of the anxiety of the 'Death of God' because the descent itself is the ultimate disclosure of the triumph of love. Holy Saturday is the process of the transformation of the tragedy of human existence: it is the experience of God descending into the depths of that which is lost and hopeless, opening up a way for us through the very powers that would otherwise destroy us.

Balthasar writes:

The Word descends vertically from the highest height, deeper than any mere human word can descend, into the last futility of empty time and hopeless death. This word does not prophetically transfigure death, playing around it: he bores right through it to the bottom, to the chaotic formlessness of the death cry (Mt 28:50), and to the wordless silence of death on Holy Saturday. Hence, he has death in his grip; he dominates, limits it and takes from it its sting.<sup>1</sup>

Balthasar's passionate and enigmatic language is not necessarily an attempt on his part to explain or justify this radical 'beyond' of human tragedy or pain; rather, it is a way of following Christian revelation to wherever it might lead. For Balthasar, the foundation of all of our theology of hope is that Jesus himself was led to this place in order to find us there. He is certainly not a lone voice in this neglected territory of Christian imagination in which the eclipse of light requires courageous and sympathetic elucidation.

*Language, solidarity and abandonment*

In a recent article in *Theological Studies*,<sup>2</sup> Paul G. Crowley comments on Rahner's theological reflections on the experience of sorrow and perplexity. What seems at first glance to be more a theology of Christian pessimism emerges as a radical understanding of what human sorrow consists of in all its unfathomable depths of darkness and the eclipse of hope. Crowley underlines that, for Rahner, this kind of engagement has nothing to do with morbidity, but is an exercise in promoting a theology that sustains both an imagination and a praxis that is hopeful and healing. There is an inevitability in the use of language that has to do with passivity, impotence and a silence that is fearful before life's mysteries. This he sees as a moment in the momentum of hope, a moment corresponding to Balthasar's more graphic and mythological account of the paschal process.

John Sobrino, in his book, *Jesus the liberator*, takes up this theology as one of solidarity and hope. He turns to God's absence and silence when Jesus is on the cross as the most wounding dimension of the death of Jesus. It is also that about the Christian faith which has most to do with solidarity as a mode of presence and as a mode of love. The phrase, 'Crucified God', is therefore no more than another term, provocative and shocking, with the same meaning as 'God of Solidarity'. The question remains why solidarity has the mode of crucifixion, but we human beings understand very well – without finding a logical explanation for it – that in history there is no such thing as love without solidarity and there is no solidarity without incarnation. Solidarity that is not prepared to share the lot of those with whom it wants to show solidarity is paternalism, to put it mildly, or leads to despotism. Solidarity in a world of victims that is not prepared to become a victim in the end is not solidarity.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that the extremes of this kind of theological language are necessary because of the extremes of human experience that are at

stake here. If our language remained purely forensic or if it shied away from what is passive and impotent, then it would leave untouched that whole range of Holy Saturday experience that is familiar territory to the lives and experience of so many human beings. Sobrino is speaking from the experience of the suffering of the poor in Latin America, Crowley is finding in Rahner a language to articulate the sorrow of AIDS, and Balthasar is, perhaps, focusing more on the experience of Jesus as such. What they all have in common is the interpretation of actual human, personal and social experiences, and the desire to do some justice to their depths when such experiences are coloured by despair and abandonment.

### *A rich silence of stillness*

What I would finally like to offer are some simple instances where I think a Holy Saturday language can be helpful. There are different ways in which silence may have richness and depth. The call to silence in St John of the Cross or in Thomas Merton, for instance, is often conceived as a call to sounds of silent love, almost a kind of mystical music. Silence evokes the kind of solitude that is not lonely and empty, painful or restless. It is part of that wholesome spirituality that seems so attractive to many and yet which is only part of the picture. There are some of us for whom a rich silence is what is almost completely unobtainable. While longing for that place of stillness, almost always spoken of as deep within, and listening for the still small voice that Scripture speaks of and many say they enjoy, we often only come up against our own pain which shuts out the very experience of silence that we long for. Moralists and spiritual health enthusiasts may tell us that this is an issue of ego or of neurosis which is of our own choosing or making. Is it not ironic indeed that, when presented as a piece of advice, the sense of empowerment which for others is a mark of spiritual maturity completely closes in those who have failed to find a way out. We must be very bad people, indeed, and therefore go back into hiding. The Holy Saturday experience, however, takes seriously the empty and fearful silences and is not a judgemental mode of direction – in fact, it offers no way out, but accompanies and simply remains, shedding its compassionate and humbly hopeful shadow. I was going to say ‘light’, but that would not be true. The light comes later and is the truth of resurrected love. That is not the truth that Holy Saturday illumines. Holy Saturday is more subtle than Easter Sunday, less noisy than Good Friday. Its silence does not threaten those who are

familiar with its 'other' and darker side. It has no mechanism, nor deadline, and meets us where we are.

The experience of abandonment, too, can be so diminishing for us that our ability to cope or understand fails us. Events in life pass sentence and the one condemned hears the coded message, 'You are on your own now'. The dark and passive night sets in as never before. The outsider finds it hard to begin any kind of journey home. It is quite paradoxical that the therapeutic community has learned to honour this particular human kind of journey whilst the religious establishment can still feel rather awkward about these dimensions of people's lives and experience. The Holy Saturday affirmation of Hell as a christological place sets such an agenda for our Christian behaviour and attitudes towards the whole issue of abandonment and rejection – the place of the lost, the condemned and the sinner – that one is left wondering what radical spirituality is really all about. So much becomes harmless and cosy because it is about those of us who feel we are on the inside. Hell, however, is where God goes to find and search for all that he loves. Balthasar identifies an eternity in this kind of abandonment, for the loveless and for the one who loves. We ritualize this on Holy Saturday, but it is lived all of the time. Not everyone need identify with this, but there will always be some whose special feast day will be Holy Saturday.

*Connecting with the mystery of Holy Saturday and the God of the condemned*

It may have become apparent that the theological language of Holy Saturday is a very strange one indeed. However, it is entirely consistent with much of the mystical tradition in Christianity which understands the darkness and the eclipse of certainties and clarity as very profound spiritual experience, in fact the ante-chamber to the most intimate union of love with God. St John of the Cross advises the soul that comes up against the silence and darkness to wait as if it were at the other side of love. It is one thing to write about this and another thing to visit or to re-visit this nether-world in reality. The populated hell much taken to by a certain kind of contemporary piety and theological imagination paradoxically misses the point that someone like Balthasar poignantly grapples with: those that appear to be abandoned or to have abandoned God, and the extreme loneliness of the one who is damned. Like St Paul in Romans 9–11, when he suffers in a very personal way the theological fact of Israel's

rejection and apparent abandonment of the God of her covenant, Balthasar is conscious only of the providence and purposes of God's overwhelming grace: that God is the God of the condemned and the abandoned and the mystery of the damned is precisely the mystery of the love that in Jesus takes on the form only of solidarity.

Whilst this language about the damned and the abandonment of Hell may not rest easily on our ears, it is perhaps a necessary language to give expression to the seemingly impenetrable cul-de-sac of darkness that is the experience of many people's lives. People do not describe such darkness as of their own choosing; in a very real and existential way they feel themselves 'condemned' to the eclipse of light or indeed of any illumination. The human dread of being cut off from ultimate fulfilment can only be equated with the human dread of not being able to find even momentary relief from the encircling gloom. It is this kind of dread and fear that darkness is really all about and facile equations of how light may come into the darkness do not necessarily work in practice – to shine too brightly may only serve to blind people whose eyes are only used to shadows and darkness. What is on offer in the mysteries of a Holy Saturday spirituality is a more merciful and more human introduction to the possibility of light at the end of the tunnels of experience. It is fundamentally a spirituality of silence, of accompaniment and of waiting. Holy Saturday tells us that like the priest and the woman in our story at the beginning, we are led to the precipice of human experience, the 'chiaroscuro of darkness and light inviting us to the deep silence where love is wordless'.

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#### NOTES

1 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Man in history* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p 283.

2 Paul G. Crowley, *Theological Studies* (May 1997).

3 John Sobrino, *Jesus the liberator* (Burns & Oates, 1993), p 239.