

# Lockdown: the Holy Saturday experience

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This year millions of us are locked in our homes. We are not going out to work, not going out to play, going nowhere to socialise. It is – so long as we are virus free and not one of those who have to try and tackle it or have to stay at their posts to keep the basics running – a bit like a big blank space. A shapeless empty time between BF ('Before the Virus') a few weeks ago (aka 'normality') and AF ('After the Virus') which will begin ... when? ... soon? ... when normality, we hope, returns.

This year we can use that sense of a 'blank time between' to appreciate a part of the Christian year we usually skip. The Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Holy Saturday is the great blank space in the liturgical year! Nothing seems to be happening: there are no special ceremonies, the Eucharist is never celebrated, and it is not even brought to the sick except as viaticum. In monastic communities the Liturgy of the Hours continues, but even here there is a sense of continuing the thoughts of Friday or a sense of simply waiting for the vigil that will herald in Easter. Most of the actual liturgical activity that does take place in communities is severely practical in nature: cleaning, polishing, preparing a fire, practicing ceremonies, arranging this and that – and complaining by the sacristan that some new idea just will not work because this is not how it is always done! But this gap in the liturgy has another value as a recollection of some aspects of our liturgy that are otherwise completely forgotten.

## *Sabbatum sanctum*

In many European languages, and always in Latin when used in the liturgy, the name of the sixth day of the week is not the *dies Saturni* – 'the day of Saturn' – but *Sabbatum* derived from the Hebrew name *Shabbat*: the Sabbath. So in Italian we have *sabato*, and in Spanish *sábado*, both from *Sabbatum*. We in English, using 'Saturday,' are probably following the Welsh *dydd Sadwrn* (itself borrowed from Latin at a time when Christian terminology had not yet made inroads upon Latin culture), hence we are not easily familiar with the notion of Saturday as 'the Sabbath.' We tend to think of 'the sabbath' as a foreign name one hears about in the Scriptures or as part of the Ten Commandments: 'to keep holy the Sabbath day.' But, today, on the holy Sabbath of the Christian year it is a good idea to recall our links with the Sabbath.

The first, and most obvious, recollection it should call to mind is how our faith is rooted in Judaism: Jesus was a Jew who kept the Sabbath, ‘the Scriptures’ which were used to make sense of him and proclaim him by the evangelists are the books that were sacred to the Jews of the time, and despite the fact that many people find readings from the Old Testament ‘difficult’ and ‘obscure,’ we need to face the fact that without appreciating that ‘back story’ we cannot understand Jesus, his words, or his works. Likewise, we cannot understand our liturgy: we gather to bless the Father at the Eucharist, and we use Jewish table prayers to do this! We tend to link Eucharistic Prayers with the presence of Jesus – but their function is to bless God the Father through, with, and in Jesus as his Anointed One using prayer formulae that derive from the domestic rituals of Jews during the Second Temple period.

Here are few blessings of God, taken from the psalms, which illustrate the basic form of prayer that Jesus used when he ‘blessed the Father’ and which, in turn, influence us to this day: ‘Blessed be God!’ (63:35); ‘Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things’ (72:18); ‘Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen’ (72:19); ‘Blessed be the Lord forever. Amen and Amen’ (89:52); and ‘Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes’ (119:12). Whenever prayer by Christians strays far from these Jewish prayer-forms it tends to get lost in metaphysical abstractions or pious confusions.

But there is a more obscure memory connected with the Sabbath. Why do Christians worship on Sunday – and we should note that we have been gathering for our common banquet on this day since less than a decade after the crucifixion? A simple answer is that this was to recall the resurrection, but this does not explain it: why was a particular day made the focus of the resurrection appearances within the community’s memory? The resurrection is, after all, an event beyond day-to-day time: and in choosing a particular day to recall it, they were giving an historical expression to their fundamental belief that God had raised Jesus from the dead. The most plausible explanation is that the first followers of Jesus (decades before they would be called ‘Christians’) knew they had to gather and celebrate what they believed had been revealed by God in Jesus. The way to do this was to gather for a meal and bless God in the way that Jesus had taught them and to thank him for ‘the faith and full life [God] has made known to [them] in [Jesus]’ (*Didache* 10:2). But when were they to gather for this Jesus-meal? They were still celebrating the Sabbath and its meal, and so had to find another day for their meal as

Jesus's disciples – and so chose the next available day: *the day after the Sabbath*. While the Sabbath meal was a domestic, family affair with the father of the family blessing God for those around the household's table; their meal as disciples of Jesus was a larger common affair: it was open (even to sinners and prostitutes), it established a new relationship of sisters and brothers among those who took part, involved sharing with others, and blessing God as Father in the way Jesus had. This new banquet was seen as a foretaste of the final heavenly banquet. It took place after work – Sunday was a workday – and during it these communities recalled that Jesus was not dead but risen: and they structured their memory of his resurrection and his appearances around the time of their gathering. So today we still hear of the risen Jesus coming among the very first groups on a Sunday evening – as we see in the Emmaus story found in Luke (24:13-35). Saturday continued as the Sabbath with its memories of the Creation and the history of God's gifts; Sunday had its common meal and its memory of his gift of Jesus, the new community gathered from the four winds, and which rejoiced in his promise of resurrection.

We have all but forgotten these 'Jewish-Christians' (to use a modern phrase), but on Holy Saturday each year we should recall them, and the very complex origins of our religion. If we had kept these memories more clearly, some of the most brutal and shameful moments in Christian history might have been avoided. You may have looked out the window of your apartment on Wednesday night to see the big ('Pink') full moon. Now recall that it is this full moon that began Pesach (aka 'Passover') this year: it began on Wednesday evening and will end next Thursday evening (16 April). This celestial phenomenon that gives us the date of our central feast is that which gave, and still gives, the date for Passover. If only we would remember each time we see this 'Easter moon' that we Christians are an offshoot of second-temple Judaism, then we would be spiritually richer —and humanity might have been spared much suffering.

### *Harrowing Hell*

By the end of the second century this day had become associated with the notion of 'the descent among the dead' and Jesus bringing his good news first to all those who were waiting in their tombs for the fullness of revelation. So we imagine the Christ going to bring new life to Adam and Eve, to Moses and the prophets, and to David and the kings. Jesus greets them, as a second century preacher says, 'holding in his hand his victorious weapon: his cross' with which he challenged the forces of death and evil (Ancient Homily, see *Breviary*, vol 2, 320-2). This is a part

of the Christian story that has all but disappeared from modern western Christianity, but it was part of Latin Christianity in earlier centuries when this story was called ‘the harrowing of hell.’ Moreover, it is the story behind the Eastern icon of the resurrection which shows the risen Lord, with his appearance transformed with celestial radiance behind him, trampling down ‘the gates of hell’ and greeting Adam, David, Moses, and their wives.

This memory of ‘the harrowing of hell’ is important to us for several reasons. First and foremost, it reminds us that the mystery of the resurrection is something beyond this world, beyond imagination, and not to be confused with some sort of magical trick nor some notion of resuscitation. We tend always to reduce the mystery of God to ‘facts’ which we then think we can measure – and in that action either prove or disprove them! The person who asks if Jesus rose on Sunday morning or on Saturday evening has fallen in to this trap! The mystery of the resurrection is God beckoning us with his love that we shall one day ‘stand in his presence and serve him.’ But the fullness of what that means is beyond us: so we tell stories, and the more stories we tell the better: hence all the differing resurrection stories we find in the gospels and other early Christian writings. Each tells us something, none is complete. But we should be warned: once we start trying to co-ordinate all these tales into a consistent ‘book of evidence,’ then we are seeking to replace mystery with some sort of paranormal history. Hearing the story of the harrowing and looking at the eastern icon should remind us that all the resurrection accounts are attempts to convey in human images the mystery of God’s untold love.

Second, since the late middle ages we western Christians have dwelt on the suffering Jesus on the cross, but this early story reminds us that the cross was seen as a symbol of victory. This is why we call the day of the crucifixion ‘good’ Friday and why we sing praises to the cross on that day. We sing of a victory over death gained for us by Jesus who delivers us from all bondage. Whether it is an ancient cross with jewels, a medieval cross like that of the Franciscan cross of San Damiano or a modern ‘Liberation Theology’ cross does not matter, for all these crosses convey (in contrast to renaissance crucifixes with their emphasis on a ‘realistic’ presentation of suffering) that the cross too is a mystery: all our suffering is taken up into the life of God and new life springs from it. The cross is a beginning of liberation, not a failure.

Third, we western Christians have become very imperialistic in our views of *our* Christianity: it is the post-Reformation or post-Tridentine style or

nothing! Yet the fact that on this day we look at older ways of thinking and at eastern icons should remind us of the range and variety that exists inside the Christian circle. If we had that more embracing view of difference and did not equate unity with uniformity, our history might have been so different! We might have avoided the split between east and west in the tenth and the eleventh centuries, we might have avoided the exclusivist papal claims that have caused such problems, and the scandal of division and bigoted bitterness that has dogged so much of western Christian history since the sixteenth century.

*Silence after sound*

To appreciate a piece of music one must have a moment's silence at its end! However brief, it is that moment of silence that makes the music a 'piece' and not simply more background noise. To appreciate a special day one needs an ordinary day; to appreciate a season one needs 'ordinary time'! Variety *is* the spice of life. The coronavirus lockdown makes us aware of the things we have taken for granted.

This very different Holy Sabbath, this very different sense of a day, can become the difference that is the harbinger of new life – if we just stay with its emptiness and its starkness.