Rock bottom is not a happy place to be. That hard surface of collapse from which there is “no other place to look but up” twists, contorts and mangles. Yet those who profess the paschal presence of Christ in these fifty days of Easter trust that amazing grace will pick them up and help them walk again. Such has been our national experience for the last nine months. Last September’s desperation drove hordes of people (back) into their churches to pray. That is what we do best when we hit rock bottom. Leaders of churches still search for the right words, the right hymns, the right images and metaphors to pick up worshipping assemblies and carry them through dark days. Preachers still seek to tap into the corporate imagination and create worlds of meaning that will lift drooping spirits beyond the weeks and months of grief and mourning.

The search for life-giving “words that crack” may take us round and round and bring us right back to the place in front of us, as if to see it for the first time. Already we have in place two liturgical days in our Western Christian calendar, almost lost in our pastoral observance yet central to the full grasp of the Easter mysteries. Holy Saturday and Ascension Thursday disclose the depths and heights of Christ’s glory among us. More often than not, the silent space dividing cross and tomb fades into the background of the Triduum, reflecting only what light it can borrow from the darkness of Calvary and the brightness of the Garden. Likewise, the fortieth day of Easter is absorbed into the fifty days and Pentecost is always privileged. No longer does Ascension Thursday, the fortieth day, carry imaginal power. In fact, in some dioceses it may be rescheduled to the Sunday before Pentecost. No wonder there have been attempts, even before September eleventh, to revive the doctrinal significance of these two days in the joyful hope that people invited into their life-giving meanings will be sustained by them (Connell; Lewis; Atkins; Farrow). My desire here is to stimulate interest in the richness of these two liturgical days so that preachers of God’s Word, leaders of worship and teachers of religious truths might find new ways to unleash their power in the annual visitation of our salvation story, especially in the symbols and metaphors which speak to

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our current national story of terror, collapse and transformation.

Dwelling in the Lower Regions

Once a year the Christian family takes time to replay the transforming events of our salvation story at its original speed, not as a pantomime but as an active remembering of the somber then joyous sequence. The growing tensions of the climactic week mount with grieving farewells, shameful betrayals, a guilty denial, and agonizing fears of the night before the end. Then the long dark day of pain and forsakeness is awakened by an ecstatic daybreak of the first day of Easter’s impossible possibility, the bright light of newborn life even after the desolation of darkness and death.

A profound silence hovers over the quiet Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Theologically, it is the muted apocalyptic hour between Jesus’ dying and being raised by God. Pastorally, it is the often wrongly-called “non-liturgical day” that conveniently gets us off-the-hook and gives permission for the entry of the clutter of church decorating, choir practice and rehearsals for the approaching rites of vigil. In Holy Saturday’s Office of Readings, the words of the “Ancient Homily” by an anonymous homilist still chill us: “Something strange is happening—there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began” (as quoted in Christian Prayer, 1987). Yet the mystery to be revealed is muffled; we prefer to busy ourselves rather than to sit still and receive it: “The non-event of the second day could after all be a significant zero, a pregnant emptiness, a silent nothing which says everything” (Lewis, 3; emphases his).

Lost in our doctrinal history is the “significant zero” of the earlier creedal rendering of Christ’s descent. Most consequential of the changes in the fourth century was the vocabulary shift from descensus ad inferos (Christ’s descent to the lower regions) to descensus ad inferna (his descent into hell). This change in a few letters tilted the meaning toward reconciliation of sinners and away from its earlier more embracing meaning. Christ dwelled in the lower regions to raise up those who had not yet heard the story of their redemption, to awaken those who remained in the dark (Connell, 266).

Christ visited the lower regions of humanity; he was no stranger to the abyss. And it is precisely because he hits rock bottom that the embrace of God’s grace is so wide and generous. Even those beyond the veil of time and awareness have the offer of salvation extended to them. Adam and Eve lead the long line of those dwelling in the lower regions. “The descent is a narrative of second chances for those who were thought to have no hope, no chances left” (Connell, 278). Now lifted up by the strong arms of the Savior, they rise to their full divine stature with Christ and ascend with him in glory on the fortieth day to God’s right hand. Where Christ is, we also shall be, sharing in the fullness of his glory.

This past September eleventh we were all taken down to the lower regions. For some it was an unfamiliar place; they were shocked that others could actually hate us. In the days that followed we visited the darkest human places where evil lurks, not only in the heinous acts of the young Muslims who invoked God's name at impact but also in our hate-filled responses for blood and revenge. After months of seeing pictures of faces no longer smiling, or read-

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ing of so many lives cut short in springtime, we are dragged down to the lowest regions of desolation. Yet our faith beckons us in a different direction: What Christ has assumed he has saved. That means that he took upon himself the lower places. He has been there. God knows well the dark underside of human nature and sent the only Son to redeem even the lowest of the low places. His death lifts us up and invites us to rise with him and to ascend to glory. Rock bottom is not a happy place to be. Desperate and desolate as we may be, the risen and ascending Christ invites us up and away from the hard surface of collapse to the heights of light and life. Faith in him assures that such is so.

Like so many feasts throughout the liturgical calendar, Holy Saturday and Ascension Thursday stand in relationship to one another as point-counterpoint, just as Easter Sunday and Pentecost. Jesus goes to the depths of human desolation (Holy Saturday). God breathes new life into the body of the slaughtered Lamb and, once again, passes over the people (Easter Sunday). For forty days the risen Christ proclaims God’s glory acting in him, and on the fortieth day God lifts him up to the heights of exaltation (Ascension). On the fiftieth day the Holy Spirit is given as a gift; the new Adam breathes new life into his Body (Pentecost). In him all things are created anew.

A Pastoral Proposal

In our current pastoral practice, Easter Sunday and Pentecost move to the foreground of ritual attention and take priority of place while Holy Saturday and Ascension Thursday drop to the background. To grasp the full riches of the Paschal Mystery, all four festive days need to be acting and interacting within our liturgical horizons. How might we restore these liturgical days to their proper place in the foreground along with the first and last day of the fifty days of Easter? How might we remember that Christ has descended into the lower regions? How might we actualize his lifting us up and out of the lower places, even now in the midst of trauma and transformation, as he once did for Adam and Eve?

We might start by countering the notion of Holy Saturday as a non-liturgical day. More correct is to call it a non-sacramental day on which there are no baptisms or confirmations, no Masses or confessions, no weddings or ordinations, and no anointings except in emergency. Yet liturgical acts such as fasting and public prayer are still enacted into the Triduum. Prior to the fourth century, participation in a fast was an important observance on Good Friday as well as Holy Saturday since it served as a reminder of where our real hungers and dependencies lie. In fourth-century Jerusalem the pilgrim Egeria notes that public prayer was held at the third and sixth hours but not at the ninth hour because the great Vigil was already being prepared.

Could we not, as our Eastern Christian brothers and sisters still do, gather at the third and sixth hours, that is, at nine o’clock in the morning and then again at noon, to encourage each other through the fast and to praise God in Mid-Morning and Midday Prayers from the Liturgy of the Hours? Then, after sitting still with the Lord and mindful of his visitation to the depths, we could then in the afternoon be about the business of decorating the church, rehearsing the choir and practicing the rites. Thus we may be able to encounter the “something strange . . . happening . . . on earth today” to which the anonymous homilist alludes. We may be able to visit that “pregnant emptiness,” that “silent nothing which says everything,” that points to the promised fulfillment of rising with Christ and ascending with him in glory.
On that eerie day of burial and waiting within our own human history, the crucified Christ descended into the lower regions and gazed into the abyss of holy darkness, yet on that promised day of glory, the exalted Christ ascended to the heights and took his seat at God’s right hand. And we live in the light of that same promise, no matter how hard we may hit rock bottom. Where Christ is, there shall we also be. When all hope seems lost and more than our spirits have collapsed, when terror surrounds us and insecurities threaten to bring us down, when we are brought to the lowest regions of human existence, we turn to the life of the Master and know that he too has visited these dark places. In joyful hope he waited in the abyss for the fulfillment of the promise. On the third day he was raised beyond these places and into the light. Hope blossomed supreme in the bright light of Easter morning but only after dipping down deep into the lower regions. Impossibility became possible.

That dipping down “ad inferos” / “to the lower regions” is the final consequence of the redemptive mission of Christ. God acts and “the Son is the instrument, the icon of God’s penchant for the liberation and salvation of humanity” (Connell, 276). Even on Ascension Thursday we might remember the final words of Holy Saturday’s “Ancient Homily,” ecstatic words spoken between lovers that the anonymous homilist places in God’s mouth: “I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let me leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you; together we form only one person and we cannot be separated” (Christian Prayer, 1988).

References


