

An Easter Reflection by John Scally

When I was a young boy my grandfather told me the story of a man who had lived in our village. During the Great Famine he was one of seven local men who were hung for stealing on Good Friday. Six bags of potatoes were stolen from the pit of the local landlord. Six local men with large families and no food had crept into Lord McNicholas' farmyard and stolen a bag each but the other man did nothing. This poignant story of an innocent man unjustly hung for the failures of others enabled me to think of Good Friday in an emotionally significant and humanizing way. To be honest I needed something like that to change my childhood perception that the God of Jesus Christ was really a tyrannical figure to demand the violent death of his only Son in order to put the world, which had gone wrong, right again. With maturity I came to realize that God did not want the violent death of Jesus; rather he wanted the total response of the Son. God accepts the self-sacrifice of Jesus's death because of the potential it entails for both his glorification and our glorification. The one thing I never understood though was why we had to bother going to Church on Easter Saturday when nothing really happened on that day. On Good Friday we are asked, 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?' It is an uncomfortable question and one most of us would rather avoid. Jesus died and is buried and all is apparently over. We recall the Lord going forth to sacrifice so that we too may win the laughter of Easter Day. On Easter Sunday we marvel at the miraculous. The crucified Jesus has unexpectedly become the risen Christ. The eternal has invaded the transient. The Jesus of Good Friday has shown once for all that God's relationship with each of us transcends the limitations of this life. But why waste time with Easter Saturday when Jesus is just napping in the tomb? Holy Saturday is a day of waiting, not for Godot, but for God. It is a day not about our experience but Jesus's, his descent into hell as it were, opening up a way for us through the very powers that would otherwise destroy us. As an integral, though neglected, component of the Paschal Mystery, it evokes a faithful waiting on God in the darkness of faith and invites a spirituality of silence. Only in silence and contemplation can we allow God to reveal the divine greatness to us.

Growing up on a sheep farm in Roscommon I never failed to get a little thrill from bringing a lamb into the world, especially after a very difficult birth. I felt I was part in some small way of achieving the miracle of new life.

Once I witnessed the dawn breaking as I went out to check a sickly lamb. A tumult of sound greeted me, every bird in the fields singing its heart out, although it was still dark. Gradually the sky lightened and the low bruised clouds began to be caressed with red. Then for a few moments the birds fell silent. The carollers drew close and paused to seek out instruments, searching for the string, the bow, the drum, to make the appropriate melody. That was the instant the sun appeared over the horizon. The birds went silent because of the wonder that was the only possible response. Praise was secondary. It seemed that all of nature was affected by a tremor of excitement, adoring the creator. Timelessness breathed through the daybreak like the pulsebeat of a new baby. When the birds began to sing again, it was not the pre-dawn hubbub at all but something more reverential like a heavenly choir. Subtle tunes resonated with ancient harmonies. It was like the first music ever made. All life was simplified. All thoughts were complete. Music was the best for this. The

words of everyday are unworthy vehicles to describe the transcendent. I now realize that this shock and awe was theological reflection at its most eloquent: a glorious tribute to the wonder of God. This opened my eyes to the rich mysteries of the real presence.

Easter Saturday is the day we are giving the breathing space to prepare for the real presence. It is a gentle call to slow down and reflect on the bigger picture. Who is the God of the Paschal Mystery for us today?

The God of the Easter story is an impatient figure, hungry to transform us into worthy bearers of the name 'Christian'. It is through love alone that we please God and our main challenge is to acquire it. Jesus came on earth to love and be loved. The Christian life is an exchange of love - the love we receive and the love we give for Christ. To walk the way of unconditional love is to accept an arduous task. Jesus did not come to condemn or to pontificate but to show what it means to be truly human. He came with a promise, 'I come that you may have life and have it to the full.'

Christians best respond to the invitation of Jesus to love not by building memorials to the dead but by giving food to the living. The secret of life is that only in love for the living is the spirit praised forever. Our challenge on Holy Saturday is to allow this love to be a lamp for our steps and a light for our eyes. This is a lull before the Easter storm when we remember our call to bear witness to a Christianity which has a vital, personal quality rather than being something worn ostentatiously like a religious emblem and a spirituality that is deep, mysterious and beautiful, a religion that gives sympathy to our hearts and understanding to our minds.

Holy Saturday is a day when more than any other when we are aware of the life that makes us live, the expectation of a new beginning, new birth and hope and the inexhaustible, now accessible divine potential that is all around us. It is a welcome opportunity to savour the energy, joy, and trust of the unique Easter laughter. It is a day when we are particularly conscious of the wisdom of Brendan Kennelly's incisive words, 'Self knows that self is not enough.'

In George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* Gwendolen Harleth married the revolting Grandcourt in order to provide money for her family. She hoped she would dominate him with the strength of her personality, but when she was unsuccessful she came to hate him. One day she was with him sailing in a small boat when she was harbouring murderous thoughts against him, he was swept overboard and though she tried to save him, he was drowned. He died while she was wishing death on him, so she felt that she was in a sense an accomplice to murder. She carries a deep sense of guilt around with her and feels she can never be forgiven.

In the turmoil she approached her friend Deronda and shared her feelings of guilt: 'I did kill him in my thoughts . . . It can never be altered.' Deronda listened patiently and displayed great insight into the human condition:

'He held it likely that Gwendolen's remorse aggravated her inward guilt . . . But her remorse was the precious sign of a recoverable nature . . . Deronda could not utter one word to diminish that sacred aversion to her worst self - that thorn-pressure which must come with the crowning of the sorrowful Better suffering because of the Worse. All This mingled thought and feeling kept him silent: speech was too momentous to be ventured on rashly. There were no words of comfort that did not

carry some sacrilege. If he had opened his lips to speak, he could only have echoed, 'It can never be altered - it remains unaltered, to alter other things.'

Deronda handles the situation exceptionally well. He does not attempt to tell her she is wrong to condemn herself; he does not seek to take her pain away from her; he does not try to replace her flood of grief and accusation with soothing clichés of comfort. It would not be in Gwendolen's interests not to take seriously the wrong she feels she has been guilty of. However, he is aware that in the hour of darkness she has come, for the first time, to that point of self-knowledge when the "worst" side of her nature has been absorbed and that she will not grow unless she is allowed to have the pain of knowledge.

While she did not cause her husband's death, it was accompanied by her own murderous thoughts. Hers is, to use the traditional term, a sin of the heart. Neither event can be undone: her husband will remain dead, and she cannot change what she felt towards him, but from Deronda's perspective, these terrible events can alter other things, i.e. how she lives the rest of her life. Deronda initiates the process of healing by taking seriously the struggle within Gwendolen as, for the first time, she is confronted with the truth of her nature. In this way the events of the past can alter the future since something new has been introduced into Gwendolen's experience. The tyranny of the past can be broken; the sin of the past can be healed in the future - not by minimising the seriousness of the past, but by putting the past in the perspective of a different future.

On Holy Saturday we look back at the tyranny of the past which reached its awful and bloody climax on Good Friday but we also get a chance to draw breath and reflect on the way Jesus Christ has put our dark past into the perspective of a wondrous future. We prepare ourselves to greet the risen Christ who experienced the fullest joy so that we too could share that glory. Describing the event James Kirkup in his poem *There is a New Morning* points to the birth of a new order:

*There is a new world, and a new man
Who walks amazed that he so long
Was blind, and dumb; he who now towards the sun
Lifts up a trustful face in skilful song,
And fears no more the darkness where his day began.*