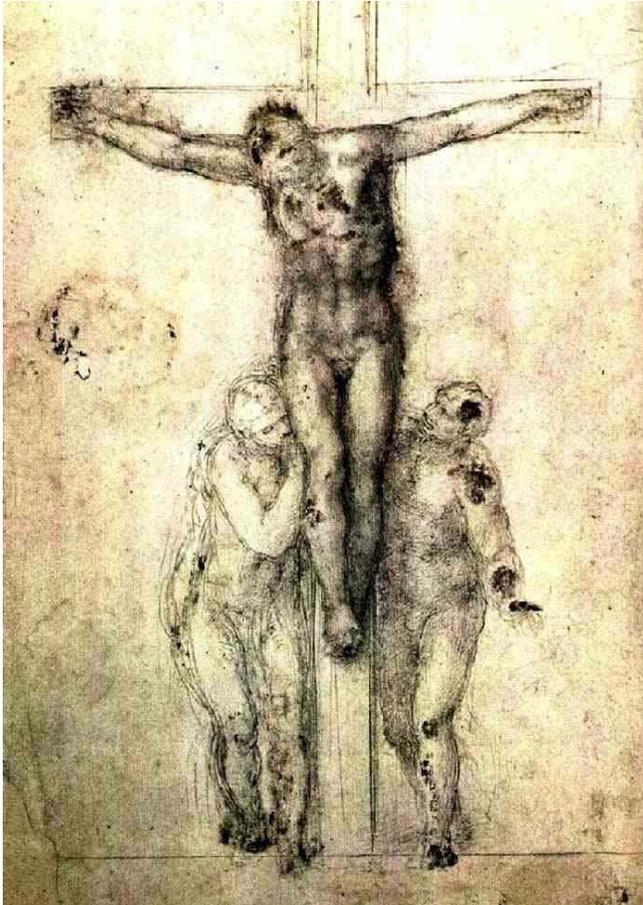


3. Meditation Three: Cross & tomb

I want now to reflect on this theme of absence and presence in relation to Good Friday and Holy Saturday. The temptation is to include Easter Sunday and thereby jump to the conclusion of this divine-human drama. However, I will be focusing on the cross and the tomb.

a) Cross



(Michelangelo, 16th C.) To understand the Cross and how it simultaneously represents both the presence and absence of God we must first consider the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ – the divine-human one – God is intimately present to us. And in the life and ministry of Jesus we see the true pattern for created human life, a life that has been healed and re-opened to its perfection. Jesus is the one who re-shapes the very fabric of social, economic and political life, healing what is misshapen, exorcising that which was under false authorities and re-directing to life that which is orientated to death. In sum, Jesus enables creation to enter into the promised Sabbath and is demonstrating what that Sabbath, that Shalom, that Kingdom looks like. In Jesus Christ we see what happens

when human life and God are properly present to each other.

Yet, at the same time, Jesus' life and ministry reveals to us the ways in which God and humans are divided from each other. From his birth to his death Jesus is engaged in an act of suffering love, a single movement which is all the time breaking apart the power of sin and death. The crucifixion is simply the culmination of Jesus' suffering and unveils the true face of all that stands against the way, the truth and the life of Jesus Christ. For in Jesus we see the meeting point or fusion of humanity's rejection of God and God's judgement upon that rejection.

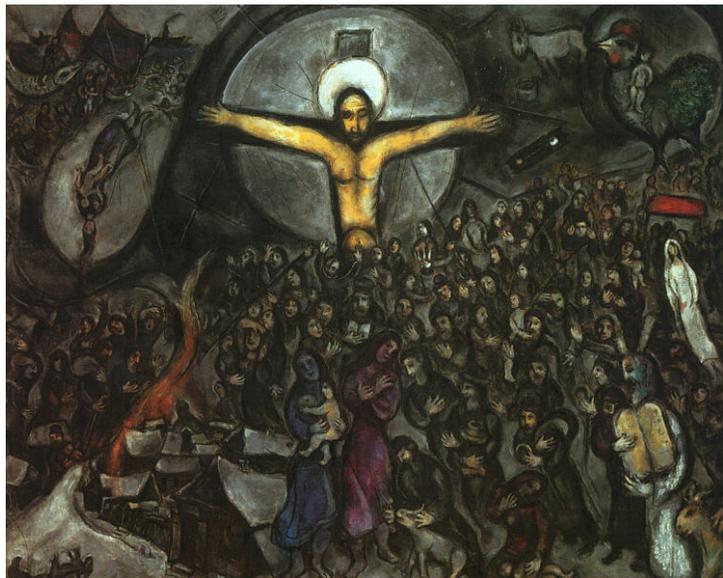
To understand the nature of this suffering we must be clear about what God's judgement consists of. If sin constitutes the 'No' of humans to God: how is God to respond? God's reaction against sin is often described in terms of punishment – but this term needs to be handled with great care.

The refusal of the way, the truth and the life of Jesus involves an active commitment to what is false, evil and distorted. Thus the New Testament talks of God abandoning the sinner rather than punishing them. The spurned and rejected lover withdraws so that the forces of death and destruction operate in a more and more unrestrained way. Thus the dance we reflected on in the Old Testament reaches a fevered pitch in the Gospels.

To rebel against God is to rebel against true life, it is to reject real freedom in favour of patterns of self-enslavement (sin) and enslavement to false gods (idolatry): both of which are ways in which we abandon God. As Romans 1 spells out, the judgement of the loving God against the sinner is that they shall be allowed to have their own way. The high point of this mutual withdrawing is the crucifixion: the moment when the forces of death and destruction are allowed full sway. But instead of humanity suffering the utter negation of all that generates life, it is the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who absorbs its full impact. He is the meeting point of the utter negation of life with the origin and ground of all life.

(March Chagall, *Exodus*)

In his life and crucifixion – that is, in his suffering – sin and death are exploded and the possibility of new and true and good life is opened up once again. It is point that Chagall draws out powerfully in his painting entitled *Exodus* where he links the story of liberation from Egypt with the Crucifixion, Christ becoming a second Moses figure. Only instead of the Red Sea, Christ passes through the valley of death. Yet this is no Cecil B De Mille depiction – the process is chaotic and fraught with danger. A shadow of threat hangs over the whole scene.

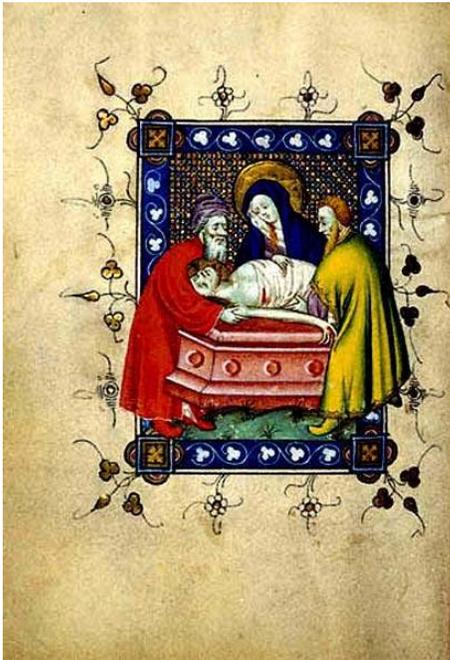


On the Cross, God in Christ is fully present to us in our sin and suffering, taking it on and destroying the power of sin and evil to destroy us. Yet, paradoxically, God the Father completely withdraws from sin and evil. In short, God enters into self-contradiction. We can only make sense of this in Trinitarian terms: in the Son God becomes accursed in our place and in the Father God is forsaken by the Son and yet, in the Spirit, God remains One. And so on the Cross we see both God fully present to sin, suffering and death, yet also, wholly withdrawn from it (for

these things have no place in God) and abandoning this human – Jesus – as one who was bearing all our sin.

Suffice to say, it is at the foot of the Cross we confront the mystery of faith: the possibility of true life in the midst of death, presence through absence, of fulfilment through negation, of strength in weakness, of unity in self-contradiction.

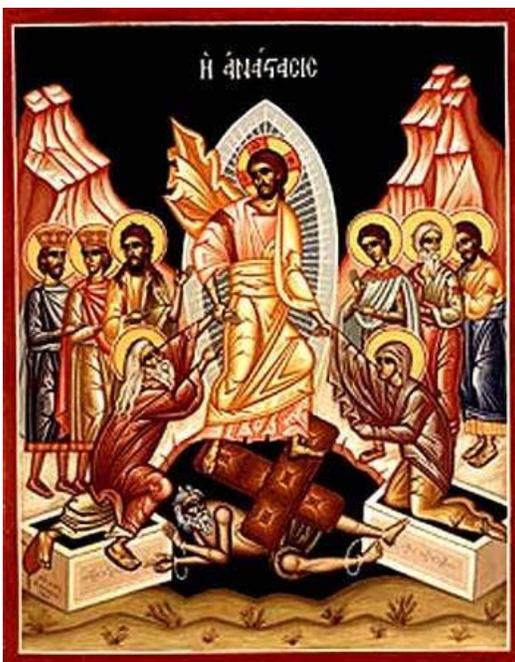
b) Tomb



After Good Friday comes Holy Saturday, when God lies in the tomb. Too often we want to jump from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, from Cross to resurrection, both at a personal level and as a church. Yet it is vital we dwell in Holy Saturday, that we take stock of those times in our life which are Holy Saturday moments.

Van Delf, *The Entombment*, 15th C Bible Illumination

There are a number of ways the Christian tradition has made sense of Christ's entombment.



Some have seen it in terms of Christ entering into 'hell' or Sheol and drawing all those who had not been able to respond to Christ out of it (represented here by Adam and Eve). Christ's entrance to the world of the dead on Holy Saturday is a positive response to the questions posed in Psalm 88.10-12:

Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you? Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?

(Mt Athos Icon)

Holy Saturday can be read as God's 'Yes' to these questions. This strand of the tradition emphasises that there is nothing and no one, not even the dead, who are beyond the scope of God's redemption.



(Henner, *The Entombment*) There is also a somewhat strange strand in the tradition, set out in Gregory of Nyssa, which sees Christ's burial not only as a descent into death but also a day of rest, another Sabbath. In Christ's death, the Creator rests again, well pleased with the finite and passing creature. In this view, what it means to be creatures, to be beings who return to dust is affirmed as good. Through Christ, death becomes part of human life again. Death ceases to be an enemy, and is itself healed and re-opened to new life. Thus, in Christ, even our death is made present to God. On this view, Holy Saturday is about learning to be mortal and Christ's affirmation of our mortality.

But what I want to dwell on is that Holy Saturday teaches us to wait in faith and hope. Unlike the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai, we must wait with patience at the foot of the Cross. Abiding in Holy Saturday teaches us to wait without distraction and without seeking a false resolution to the absence of God – despite the pain and suffering we endure. Like fasting, dwelling in Holy Saturday teaches us to desire and long for God faithfully and righteously. It helps us to seek first the Kingdom of God and know that all other things come second to that. We can wait patiently, whatever our circumstances, because, the good news of Easter Saturday is that God will go to any length to break the power of all that separates us from communion with Him, that even death, in its tragic and destructive aspects, cannot keep us from God. At Christ's grave, we can truly contemplate the reality of Paul's words in Roman 8.38-39:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

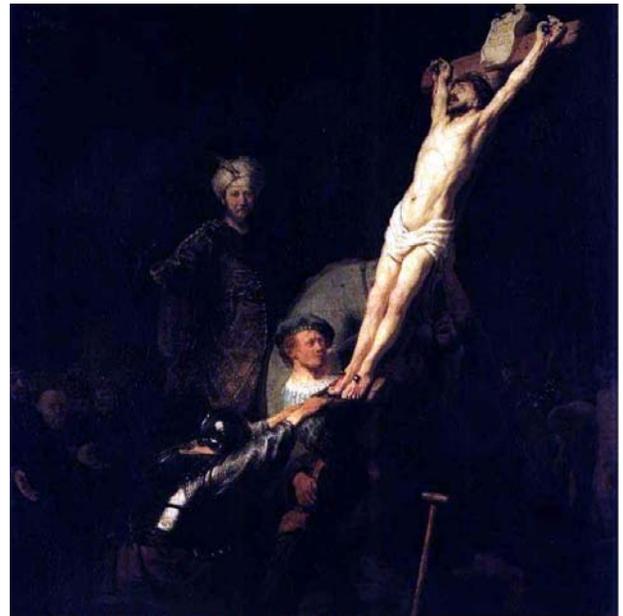
Reflection point:

In this final time of contemplation, reflect on the Cross and the Tomb: what do they say to you about your relationship with God? In the drama of Christ's crucifixion and entombment where would you place yourself? Who would you

identify with: the soldiers? Mary and the disciples? One of the nameless spectators? The criminals crucified with Jesus? Or Pilate, safe in his Palace?

Here are two pictures to help you: on the right is a picture by Rembrandt. In it, the thick darkness merges the crucifixion and the tomb. Just visible in the gloom is the artist: he looks out at us from behind the cross, placing us, the viewer, as an onlooker to Christ's crucifixion. We are both spectators and participants in the killing of Jesus.

By contrast, the modern artist Georgia O'Keefe places us behind the cross and directs us to look at the world from Christ's perspective, to reflect on what the world looks like from where Christ is on the cross. Unlike Rembrandt, she links the cross and the resurrection: on the farthest reaches of the horizon, underneath the crossbar, we can just see the first tendrils of the dawning light.



Eschatological conclusion

The Passion of Christ speaks of a pattern of relationship in which God is not willing to crush us by his total presence, but is willing to accept Adam's withdrawal, but at the same time, God does all he can to enable Adam to come into relationship again. Yet this restoration is not forced upon us, rather, we are wooed, wooed to the point of death on a cross and even beyond death to a point where new life with and for each other is possible.

This new life which Christ makes possible is not a return to an Eden-like Golden Age. We are like Abraham: we must leave where we are and be changed in order to enter a new land. However, neither is this new life some future Utopia in which all are completely present to each other, and there is no future and no past, only a satiated immediacy of fulfilled desire. Instead, we live within the grammar of that ancient acclamation 'Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again': we have a past, present and future in Christ, but this past, present and future is a history of presence and absence, withdrawal and intimacy, veiling and unveiling. There is always more to God and to others, we cannot exhaust or simply repeat or stabilise who we are or who God is. As with the first Sabbath, the promised Sabbath takes place at the beginning of a new creation, a beginning of movement into ever deeper communion with God and each other. Moreover, as the cross and tomb make clear, this is a communion which draws in our own pain and suffering, as well as that of those around us, and draws it into a place that is simultaneously a healing of our past (rather than a forgetting) and a perfection of our present (rather than an eradication) and a new future (rather than an extension of what we already know).

In our sinful condition, absence becomes alienation and estrangement and presence becomes oppression and domination. Yet what unfurls in the Bible, and is revealed in the life and death of Jesus Christ, is a form of absence which is not a void or emptiness and a form of presence that is not oppressive or controlling but allows our distinctness to be heard and this absence and presence together enables the free play of who we are in relation to God and others.

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