

Easter Saturday

If yesterday, Good Friday, was the day that Christians mark Jesus's death on the cross, and tomorrow, Easter Sunday, is the day of the Resurrection, then what is today?

A sermon from the first centuries of the Christian era says. "Today there is a great silence over the earth," it says, "God has died in the flesh." The death of God sounds like a desperate situation, rather than a text of faith recited through the Christian centuries. Yet the idea follows the central belief that God became man and was born in Bethlehem, only to die outside the walls of Jerusalem.

So when many take a day off today after honouring of the events of Good Friday, and perhaps set to in the church to decorate it with flowers and to change the altar colours in preparation for Easter - Christ's body lies in the tomb. But in one line of scripture, tucked away in the second letter of Peter, we are told that, *"He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which he also went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey..."*, *1Peter 3:18a,19* (how did Peter know this? Did Christ tell him?) - so, we are told, Jesus was not content to just lie around in isolation - he went down to hell to those 'in prison' - he is their God too! This Christian doctrine is present in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe.....he descended into hell."

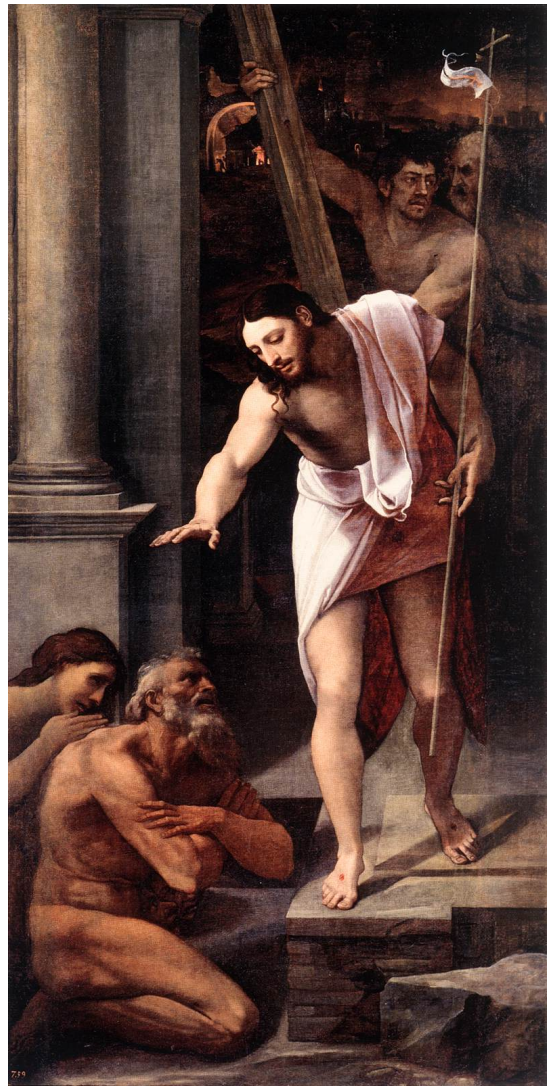
If we follow Peter's declaration, Jesus was really dead, with his soul separated from his body, which lay in the tomb. It was then, the belief grew, that he brought the good news to hell or Hades. This became known as the "Harrowing of Hell", and this one line of scripture had a strong appeal to visual artists in the western and eastern Christian traditions. Perhaps none is more energetic than the mural inside the church of the Saviour in Chora outside the old walls of Constantinople, where Christ, having broken the doors of hell, pulls Adam and Eve by their wrists from their graves.



The scene is realised in an utterly different way by the Renaissance artist Sebastiano. This painting has Jesus reaching down with a muscular arm to comfort the prisoners of Hades.

Sebastiano shows Christ with the wounds of his death in his hands, feet and side, here shown as the smallest red marks. By his wounds, the dead are healed and death is undone. When he rises from the dead on Easter day, these wounds will still be seen, as they are days later to doubting Thomas, his disciple.

New life at Easter is more than the symbolism of Easter eggs. It is light brought into the places of sin, suffering and death. With his own wounds still fresh on his entombed body, Jesus stands there bringing light to those in the darkness of hell.



This light is also brought to we who, whilst we have bright weather at the moment, feel cut off and in the darkness of isolation, worry and depression. It is a light which says that, even from the tomb, Jesus remains Emmanuel, “God With Us” – with us who look for the light. He stands with us bringing the light and hope of heaven.

Fr Bob