

## THREE MEDITATIONS ON HOLY SATURDAY

### The anguish of an absence by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger

#### MEDITATION 1

It is with increasing insistence that God is said to be dead today. The first time it was said, in Jean Paul, it was just a nightmarish dream: Jesus who is dead proclaims to the dead from the rooftops of the world that when he journeyed to the beyond he found nothing, no heaven, no merciful God, just infinite nothingness, the silence of the gaping void. It is still a horrible dream which is pushed to one side, wailing away in the waking hours, as a dream does, although the anguish it inflicts can never be cancelled for it was always lying in wait, sinister, in the depths of the soul.

A century later, in Nietzsche, it becomes a mortal seriousness which is expressed in a cry, shrill with terror: "God is dead! God will stay dead! And we have killed him!". Fifty years later, it is discussed with academic detachment and preparations are made for a "theology after the death of God", eyes search for ways to go on and men encourage each other to start preparing to take God's place. The terrible mystery of Holy Saturday, its abyss of silence, has thus acquired a crushing reality in these days of ours. For, this is Holy Saturday: the day of God's concealment, the day of that unprecedented paradox we express in the Creed with the words: "Descended into hell", descended into the mystery of death. On Good Friday we still had the crucified man to look at. Holy Saturday is empty, the heavy stone of the new tomb is covering the dead man, it's all over, the faith seems to have been definitively unmasked as fantasy. No God saved this Jesus who posed as his Son. There is no further need for concern: the wary who were somewhat hesitant, who wondered if things could have been different, were right after all.

Holy Saturday: the day God was buried; is not this the day we are living now, and formidably so? Did not our century mark the start of one long Holy Saturday, the day God was absent, when even the hearts of the disciples were plunged into an icy chasm that grows wider and wider, and thus, filled with shame and anguish, they set out to go home, dark-spirited and annihilated in their desperation they head for Emmaus, without realizing that he whom they believed to be dead is in their midst? God is dead and we killed him: are we really aware that this phrase is taken almost literally from Christian tradition and that often in our *viae crucis* we have made something similar resound without realizing the tremendous gravity of what we said? We killed him, by enclosing him in the stale shell of routine thinking, by exiling him in a form of pity with no content of reality, lost in the gyre of devotional phrases, or of archaeological treasures; we killed him through the ambiguity of our lives which also laid a veil of darkness over him: in fact, what else would have been able to make God more problematical in this world than the problematical nature of the faith and of the love of his faithful?

The divine darkness of this day, of this century which is increasingly becoming one long Holy Saturday, is speaking to our conscience. It is one of our concerns. But in spite of it all, it holds something of comfort for us. The death of God in Jesus Christ is at the same time the expression of his radical solidarity with us. The most obscure mystery of the faith is at the same time the clearest sign of a hope without end. And what is more: only through the failure of Holy Friday, only through the silence of death of Holy Saturday, were the disciples able to be led to an understanding of all that Jesus truly was and all that his message truly meant. God had to die for them so that he could truly live in them. The image they had formed of God, within which they had tried to hold him down, had to be destroyed so that through the rubble of the ruined house they might see the sky, him himself who remains, always, the infinitely greater. We need the silence of God to experience again the abyss of his greatness and the chasm of our nothingness which would grow wider and wider without him.

There is a Gospel scene which in an extraordinary way anticipates the silence of Holy Saturday and which again, therefore, seems to be a profile of the moment in history we are living now. Christ is asleep on a boat which, buffeted by a storm, is about to sink. The prophet Elijah had once made fun of the priests of Baal who were futilely invoking their god to send down fire on their sacrifice. He urged them to cry out louder in case their god was asleep. But is it true that God does not sleep? Does not the prophet's scorn also fall upon the heads of the faithful of the God of Israel who are sailing with him in a boat about to sink? God sleeps while his very own are about to drown - is not this the experience of our lives? Don't the Church, the faith, resemble a small boat about to sink, struggling futilely against the waves and the wind, and all the time God is absent? The disciples cry out in dire desperation and they shake the Lord to wake him but he is surprised at this and rebukes them for their small faith. But are things any different for us? When the storm passes we will realize just how much this small faith of ours was charged with stupidity.

*And yet, O Lord, we cannot help shaking you, God, you who persist in keeping your silence, in sleeping, and we cannot help crying to you: Wake up, can't you see we are sinking? Stir yourself, don't let the darkness of Holy Saturday last for ever, let a ray of Easter fall, even on these times of ours, accompany us when we set out in our desperation towards Emmaus so that our hearts may be enflamed by the warmth of your nearness. You who, hidden, charted the paths of Israel only to become a man in the end with men - don't leave us in the dark, don't let your word be lost in these days of great squandering of words. Lord, grant us your help, because without you we will sink. Amen*

## MEDITATION 2

God's concealment in this world constitutes the real mystery of Holy Saturday, the mystery already transpiring in the enigmatic words telling us that Jesus "descended into hell". At the same time, the experience of our era has offered us a completely new approach to Holy Saturday, given God's concealment in the world, which belongs to him and which should proclaim his name in a thousand languages, the experience of the powerlessness of God who is yet omnipotent - this is the experience and the wretchedness of our age.

But even if Holy Saturday has drawn deeply near to us in that way, even if we understand the God of Holy Saturday more than the powerful manifestation of God in thunder and lightning of which the Old Testament speaks, a question remains unresolved - that of knowing what is really meant by the mysterious phrase that Jesus "descended into hell". Let's be clear about it: no one is really capable of explaining it. Nor does it become clearer by saying that here "hell" is a bad translation of the Hebrew word *shêol*, indicating merely the whole kingdom of the dead and so the formula would originally have meant only that Jesus descended into the profundity of death, that he really did die and he shared in the abyss of our destiny of death. In fact, the question here is: what is death really and what really happens when we descend into the profundity of death?

We must be mindful of the fact that death is no longer the same as it was before Christ endured it, before he accepted and penetrated it, just as life, being human, is no longer the same as it was before human nature, in Christ, was able to come in contact with - and it truly did - God's own being. Before, death was just death, separation from the land of the living and, albeit at differing degrees of profundity, something like "hell", the nocturnal side of living, impenetrable darkness. But now death is also life and when we pass over the glacial solitude of the threshold of death, we always meet once more with him who is life, whose desire is to become the companion of our ultimate solitude and who, in the mortal solitude of his anguish on the Mount of Olives and of his cry on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", became a partaker of our solitudes. If a child had to venture out alone through a wood on a dark night, he would be afraid even if he were to be shown a hundred times that there was nothing to fear. He is not afraid of anything specific, to which he could put a name, but in the dark he feels insecure, an orphan, he feels the sinister character of inner existence. Only a human voice could console him; only the hand of a person he loves could banish the anguish, like a bad dream. There is an anguish - the true kind nesting in the profundity of our solitudes

- which cannot be overcome by reason but only by the presence of a person who loves us. This anguish, in fact, doesn't have an object to which we could put a name. It is the terrible expression of our ultimate solitude.

Who among us has not felt the awful sensation of this state of abandonment? Who would not hear the blessed, comforting miracle worked in these circumstances by an affectionate word? But wherever there is such solitude as to be inaccessible to the transforming word of love, then that is the place we call hell. And we know that not a few men of our time, so apparently optimistic, hold the view that every encounter remains superficial, that no man has access to the ultimate and true profundity of another and that, therefore, in the ultimate depths of every existence lies desperation, even hell. Jean-Paul Sartre expressed this poetically in one of his plays and at the same time he exposed the nucleus of his doctrine on man. One thing is sure: there will come a night when no word of comfort will penetrate the dark abandon, there will be a door which we must pass through in absolute solitude: the door of death. All this world's anguish is, in the final analysis, the anguish generated by this solitude. This is why in the Old Testament, the word indicating the kingdom of the dead was identical to the word for hell: *shêol*. Death, in fact, is absolute solitude. But this solitude which can no longer be illumined by love, which is so profound that love can no longer reach it, is hell.

"Descended into hell" - this confession of Holy Saturday means that Christ passed through the door of solitude, that he descended into the unreachable and insuperable depth of our condition of solitude. This means, however, that also in that extreme night which no word penetrates, when we will all be like children, banished, weeping, there will be a voice that calls to us, a hand that takes our hand and leads us on. Man's insuperable solitude was overcome from the moment He entered it. Hell was beaten from the moment love entered the region of death and the no man's land of solitude was inhabited by him. In his profundity, man does not live by bread. In the authenticity of his being he lives by the fact that he is loved and is himself given the faculty to love. From the moment there is the presence of love in death's sphere, then life penetrates death: life is not taken from your faithful, O Lord, but transformed, the Church prays in its funeral liturgy.

In the final analysis, no one can measure the portent of the words: "descended into hell". But if at some time it is ours to draw near to the hour of our ultimate solitude, we will be given to understand something of the great clarity of this dark mystery. In the hopeful certainty that when the hour of extreme solitude comes we will not be alone, we can already, now, presage something of what will happen. And in the throes of our protest against the darkness of the death of God we begin to be grateful for the light that comes to us from this same darkness.

### **MEDITATION 3**

In the Roman Breviary, the liturgy of the sacred triduum is structured with special care; in its prayers, the Church's real desire is to transfer us, so to speak, to the reality of the Lord's passion and, beyond the words, to the spiritual core of what happened. If we were to try to give expression to the liturgical prayers of Holy Saturday in just a few words, then we would have to speak first of all of the effect of profound peace which transpires from it. Christ has penetrated the concealment (*Verborgenheit*), but at the same time and in the very core of the impenetrable dark, he has penetrated the safety (*Geborgenheit*). Indeed, he became the ultimate safety. Now the psalmist's words of courage have come true: and even if I wanted to hide in hell, you are there, too. As the liturgy proceeds we see more and more of the first lights of Easter shining in it, like the aurora of the dawn. While Good Friday sets before our eyes the disfigured figure of the crucified man, the liturgy of Holy Saturday reflects more the image of the cross dear to the Church of old: the cross surrounded in rays of light, the sign of death and resurrection at one and the same time.

Holy Saturday thus reminds us of an aspect of Christian pity which has been lost, perhaps with the passage of time. When in prayer we look to the cross, we often see in it just a sign of the historical passion of the Lord on Golgotha. But the origin of devotion to the cross vary: as they prayed

Christians faced the East to express their hope that Christ, true sun, would rise up over history, and in this way they also expressed their faith in the Lord's return. Firstly, the cross is directly linked to this orientation in prayer. It is represented as a banner, so to speak, which the king will raise on his coming; in the image of the cross the vanguard of the cortège has already arrived in the midst of those who pray. For ancient Christianity, then, the cross is above all the mark of hope. It implies not so much a reference to the Lord of the past as to the Lord who is about to come. Of course with the passage of time, it was impossible not to feel the intrinsic need to look back at the event that happened: against all escaping within the spiritual, against any misunderstanding of the incarnation of God, it was vital to defend the unimaginable prodigal nature of the love of God who, for love of the wretched human creature, became a man himself, and what a man! It was vital to defend the holy stupidity of the love of God who chose not to proclaim something powerful but to travel the road of powerlessness to send our dream of power to the gallows and defeat it from within.

But in all this haven't we been a little too forgetful of the bond between cross and hope, of the oneness of the East with the direction of the cross, between the past and future in Christianity? The spirit of hope which breathes on the prayers of Holy Saturday should penetrate all our Christian state of being once more. Christianity is not just a religion of the past but, in no less a way, of the future; its faith is also hope, since Christ is not just the dead and risen one but he who is about to come.

*O Lord, enlighten our souls with this mystery of hope so that we recognize the light which your cross irradiates. Grant us that as Christians we will press on towards the future, towards the encounter on the day of your coming.*  
Amen

## Prayer

*Lord Jesus Christ, in the darkness of death You made a light shine; in the abyss of the deepest solitude the powerful protection of Your love now lives for ever; in the throes of Your concealment we now can sing the hallelujah of the saved. Grant us the humble simplicity of faith, which does not let us stray when You call us in the hours of darkness, of abandonment, when all seems difficult; grant us, at this time when a mortal struggle is being waged around You, light enough that we will not lose You; light enough for us to give to all those who still have need of it. Make the mystery of Your Easter joy shine, like the aurora of the dawn, on these days of ours; grant that we may truly be men of Easter in the midst of history's Holy Saturday. Grant that in the course of the days of light and dark of this age we may always with happy hearts find ourselves on the pathway to Your future glory.*  
Amen