

# Saturday

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Silent Saturday.

Sabbath. No one working. Only the Roman soldiers patrolling the streets after the commotion of the three crucifixions yesterday; just to make sure everyone got the message. Pilgrims moving around cautiously in a strangely subdued city.

The power of Rome is effective; it keeps the peace. The women disciples sit in stunned silence. They saw everything from a distance and cannot understand why it had to happen. They could not even lay out his body properly and embalm him for the tomb. For them it is a day of helpless sorrow. We now begin to understand their grief, as this virus prevents us from being with our loved ones when they get ill, when they slowly slip away from us. We can't even bury them properly. Helpless sorrow.

Joseph of Arimathea, a quiet hero, emerges from the shadows and disappears. A rich and powerful member of the Sanhedrin, an unexpected ally. He negotiates with Pilate to get the body of Jesus and welcomes him into the family tomb. Radical hospitality. Let us welcome support from everywhere and everyone. When the chips are down, we discover new partners in surprising places. But guard the agenda carefully.

Is it true that nothing is happening on Silent Saturday? It is an eerie silence. Something is brewing. Has the Son of Man really stopped doing good on the Sabbath – especially now that it is not just a child or an ox that has fallen into a well (Luke 14:5)? Can some distance from the emotions of yesterday's crucifixion perhaps help us understand what happened? Did evil really overcome him? Has it silenced his golden voice? Has it tied his caring hands?

Was he silent before Pilate – dumb like a sheep before his shearers – because he was weak and cowardly? Or was he overcoming evil by absorbing it into his body? Was he luring death and evil out of their dark cave so that they would over-reach themselves and perish in the bright sunlight? Was he courageously facing evil and saying "Come and get me"? Was he showing us that evil cannot be over-powered but only out-suffered?

Proverbs 27:20 says: "Death and Destruction are never satisfied, and neither are human eyes." Death, that greedy glutton, keeps on feasting. Are we helpless before its advance? Can we really do nothing while monster death prowls our streets, while its vicious dogs – racial hatred, women abuse, child neglect, human trafficking, addiction, depression – are doing its dirty work, dragging us towards its cave to be swallowed ourselves? And now, to make it worse, the corona virus is sweeping across the world, devouring thousands more, deepening the inequalities and divisions between us.

What happened when hungry Death swallowed the Son of Man? St Ephrem the Syrian said that the Lord Jesus is the Medicine of Life and that when Death swallowed him, it was a huge mistake. He couldn't "keep him in!" The Medicine of Life was too potent for the stomach of Death, so he was forced to "vomit" Him out, together with all the departed believers of the old covenant, starting with Adam and Eve. That is what the Son of Man was doing on Silent Saturday: causing trouble on the Sabbath, as always.

When we recite the Apostles' Creed and say "He descended into hell" many of us think that it means that the Lord Jesus experienced the agony of hell on the cross in our place. That is one way of understanding it. The Patristic interpretation is that he descended into Hades, the mythical world of the dead, to break it open from the inside; to announce liberation to those imprisoned there: "He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey ... (1 Pet. 3:18-19).

Perhaps we need this interpretation now, in the face of this contagious and destructive virus – and all the extra strain it is putting on us, economically, socially and spiritually. Through the cross God does not only forgive our sins. Sin is more than the evil we do; it is also the power that imprisons us and holds us captive. But it doesn't have to be that way. Death and evil are now conquered enemies. They have been overcome because in their arrogance and pride they overestimated themselves – and underestimated the strange power of Love. We need no longer fear them – or any of their vicious dogs.

Their power has been broken for those who believe. We can live in freedom, liberated from the tyranny of sin, death and evil. And in the end God will finally remove them. It is Saturday, but Sunday's coming!

But why, Lord, is it taking so long? Why is it so hard to overcome these destructive forces? Why is it so easy to slip into the grip of darkness – and so hard to get out of it? Why are so many people around us trapped in self-doubt, poverty, loneliness, addiction? Why are there so many obstacles when we want to help them to be free?

Prayer

God of grace, we worship you  
for the gift of new creation in Jesus Christ our Lord  
May your name be glorified, may your kingdom come,  
may your will be done  
We wait for the fullness of your salvation, the completion of your plan  
Our souls wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning,  
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

Lord Jesus, we praise you

for your courage to confront evil  
for being faithful to your kingdom vision until your last breath  
for entering into the darkness of death for our sake  
for being the Medicine of Life that broke death open from the inside

Holy Spirit, we appeal to you  
Make us experience today the victory of the Lord  
Jesus over sin and evil

Set us free, more and more each day, from the forces of destruction and division  
Fill us with love so that we can share this victory with everyone around us  
Give us patience and wisdom as we make new plans for a longer period of shutdown  
In the name of the Medicine of Life, Jesus Christ,  
our crucified Lord  
Amen