

**Good Friday**  
**6/4/2012**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12**

**Psalm 22**

**Hebrews 10:16 - 25**

**John 18:1- 19:42**

**God in the corpse**

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The churches in Spain are places where devotional practice has continued, undisturbed by the influence of Protestantism. This, coupled with the enriching spoils brought in from the new world, has helped create churches and ceremonies that to our eyes are excessively rich. Their festivals and pageants are florid and expressive in the medieval style and their street decorations outstrip our expectations. Whereas at Easter the best we can do is put up a few posters advertising Hot Cross buns or Chocolate rather than anything to do with the real meaning of Easter, in Spain religious posters are put up, a popular one of which is a large picture of Jesus as a corpse - not on the cross but as a body.

Such a picture brings home a level of reality to this season that we are apt to miss in our context. In terms of drawing people to Good Friday services we could hardly imagine putting up a picture of the corpse. But it would be an unmistakable sign of what is meant by Good Friday. This was a real death. And there is more to it than that. From the beginning John's Gospel makes it clear that it was God who was incarnate in Jesus Christ. The *Icon Notes* for Holy Saturday explain that the sixth Ecumenical Council affirmed that even death could not divide the two natures of Christ: he is always fully God and fully human. That means that on Good Friday it was God who suffered, who was interred and knew the silence, the abandonment, and the cold stench of death.

We have journeyed through many Good Fridays. Can we imagine being here as if for the first time, confronted by this gruesome, hope shattering defeat – with nothing to ameliorate our loss? It is almost impossible for us to contemplate what that would be like. We know the Cross, Burial and Resurrection all form the core material of Jesus' story. The Creeds and Confessions of the church jealously guard the integrity of the cross, the central symbol of this day, refusing us to let us pass over it lightly, or to trivialise its part in this story. But we still have to struggle with how the one who preached became the one preached about following Easter Day. From the perspective of Good Friday we might wonder how this transformation took place.

This is a complex story with multiple meanings. The deeper truths will only emerge as we are prepared to hold in tension what the Cross says, and what the Resurrection says, and then to see what each of them says in the light of each other. On this day our Icon is actually a picture of a corpse. But the Christian faith says more than that Jesus was crucified. Christian faith proclaims that the one who was crucified was raised. That makes a huge difference to how we contemplate this death. The irony is that in our time we seem more able to understand the death and less able to come to terms with what it means to say he was raised.

One writer says: we have not really listened to the gospel story of the cross and the grave until we have construed this cold, dark, grey day as a day of a-theism: a day raised against love incarnate. But what are we to make of his place in the tomb? Did it mean he had never been the love and power of God enfleshed? Or did this mean this had been his last, best effort - which had failed?

With the Servant Song from Isaiah in mind it is not difficult to imagine those who saw the cross believed it was a sign Jesus was smitten by God, his ugliness being simply another indication of a separation between the two.

But it was found to be the opposite way around. When Thomas encountered the risen Christ, it was with his wounds. Through this ugliness divine love reached out to him to overcome his doubt. The message of the gospel is that it is through his wounded body, his corpse, that Jesus transmits his life and power to others. John does not give us the codes for how this happens. He tells that after this death, saving grace was found to be abroad in the world, and calls us to embrace the news.

In speaking of these things the Gospel makes a presumption: God is and God speaks, in words that live and bring life. In John's passion Jesus is the majestic incarnate one and the Cross is not the point of defeat but of victory. Here the Lord of all dies, but he does so as a conqueror, which is why the graphic and the Icon depict a skull at the foot of the cross. In medieval thought the Cross was erected on the site where Adam was created and buried. The skull is meant to belong to Adam and the Cross is the new Tree of Life on which the fate of Adam's children was decided. Because of Christ's victory, the verdict of this day is they should live, not die, which means that when Jesus is interred the Devil, death and darkness have to flee. Later, when understanding of this came, the darkness and dereliction of the cross became known as a sign of God's presence, not absence. When we were as far off as it is possible to be even there did God look upon us and love us. That is how this ghastly symbol became sign of love promised beyond our failure, beyond our cowardice and beyond our fear of death.

We would find it hard to imagine being here for the first time. But we are not deterred from hearing this story again and again. Familiarity does not breed contempt and the old-old story retold does not become redundant. The retelling allows us to find new resonances and something fresh from it becomes effective in our lives. And if we allow ourselves to consider that God was in the Cross, and the grave, as surely as God was in the Garden on Easter morning, then we cannot help believe and hope that God's promised tomorrow has taken up residence in humanity's today. And in this one man's victory lies hope for us all.

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