

## **Light in our Darkness**

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Fully to understand the Easter story it helps to be hounded by the mob, to know that nothing that you say or do can deflect the hostility, and that in any case the distinctions between true and false, just and unjust, good and evil have all been suspended. Some can undergo this experience in a spirit of charity, and one in particular rose above his suffering to forgive those who inflicted it. The Easter story tells us of the redemption that comes into the world, when such torment is willingly undergone for others' sake. But it also tells us of the time of utter darkness, the time of nothingness, when the light of creation has gone out. St John of the Cross called this the dark night of the soul. The world lay in such a darkness on the first Easter Saturday; and at the end of this most terrible week a similar darkness fell on me.

Reading the outrageous articles in the New Statesman, the Times, the Sun and elsewhere, in which things that I have never said and attitudes that I have never entertained are unscrupulously pinned on me, seeing all my work as a writer and philosopher scribbled over with ignorant and groundless accusations, I have had to take stock of my life, and for a moment it seemed that it amounted to nothing. It was as though I had been ceremonially stripped of all my assets, and shut away in a box. This has happened before, but never with such an orchestrated clamour for my destruction. Dismissed without explanation from my government position, it seemed that I was even unwanted by the conservative party, to which I have offered a lifetime of intellectual support.

Philosophy is the pursuit of truth, and this has been, for me, a source of consolation in a difficult life. But in the real emergencies truth is not enough: we stand in need of examples, and of the stories that make suffering bearable, by showing that without it there is no redemption. Hence, in times of darkness, we turn to religion, in which another kind of truth is given to us. Experiences like the one that I have just undergone, however ordinary and human, have a part in the Easter story, and it is the genius of the Christian faith to make such easy room for them. The root sentiment of Christianity is not triumph but defeat. It takes what is worst in human nature – the hounding of outsiders, the delight in cruelty, the betrayal of friends and the hatred of strangers – and winds these things into the story of Christ's passion. You too, it tells us, are members of this hate-filled mob. But you too can turn your hate to pity and your pity to love. That is what redemption means.

That, to my mind, is the way to understand Easter Saturday. The world lies fragmented at the foot of the cross, as though un-created. We are

shown the opposite of creation, a place of desolation where the light does not shine. According to the old Christian story Christ spent this day in the underworld, harrowing Hell. But we can understand the Easter message without that particular metaphor. In all of us there is a creative and outgoing principle – a principle of love, through which we renew our attachments and make a gift of our lives. When we cease to love we are as though hollowed out, deprived of the force that sustains us in being. We become a void, a negation, a thing that should not be. And into the void flows the mob, eager for victims and ardent to destroy.

That psychic mechanism is present in all of us. In the world of today, however, its effect is amplified. Twitter has made morons of us all, sweeping us along in a storm of rumour and spite. But Christians, contemplating the crucifixion, can still switch sides from the triumphant mob to the defeated victim. Through the bleakness of Easter Saturday they can experience the true meaning of the Cross, as the dark negative ushers in the Resurrection, and the light once again shines.

Indeed, the habit of focusing on the defeated victim, rather than the triumphant mob, is Christianity's strength. In the face of destruction the Christian opts for renewal. As Notre Dame burned, the crowd of agnostics in the street below recovered for a moment their Christian faith, looking up to the Angel of the Resurrection, who stands as though shivering above the roof far above. As the angel promises, Notre Dame will be reborn. Despite all that has happened to weaken Christianity in France, the Christian spirit remains, embodied in this cathedral dedicated to the protector of Paris, where she is prayed to by few but loved by many.

The Easter Saturday encounter with nothingness is a demonstration that the world must be constantly re-created. For many would-be Christians, however, the Resurrection is a sticking point. Christ's death makes sense only on the assumption that he survived it, else he is simply one more in the endless stream of victims. Yet how can we believe in such an event, which so completely defies the laws of nature and for which we have only the sketchy evidence summarized in the Gospels, in the Acts of the Apostles and in the letters of St Paul?

Leaving aside all learned theology, but taking inspiration from the poets, painters and composers who have treated this subject, I would say that Christ's resurrection, like his death, is an event in eternity. It occurs in me and in you, just so long as we put our trust in the possibility of renewal. It is a re-affirmation of the creative principle, and of the love that brought about Christ's death. The darkness that came over the world on that first Easter Saturday could be dispelled only by a renewal of this love, and this renewal comes through us. The Cross is a display of supreme forgiveness, which invites us to forgive in our turn.

Seeing the Christian mystery in that way we open a path to reconciliation with the other Abrahamic faiths. Christ's death is not a once-off event in ordinary time but, to borrow T. S. Eliot's words, 'the point of intersection of the timeless with time'. The wonderful concretion of the Gospels, which give us the shape and feel of Christ's earthly life, show love shining from a source beyond those vivid moments. To translate that idea into theological terms is not necessary. It is enough to see that there is a love that overcomes all suffering, all resentment, all negativity, and that this love is the source of our own renewal.

Which returns me to my ordeal. No sooner had the smears been published than I was inundated with messages of friendship and support. The life that I assumed to be over was now being renewed. I had undergone a death and a resurrection, and the gift of Easter had been laid on me even before I had asked for it.