

O God, who by the passion of our Lord, thy Christ, didst destroy the inheritance of death, which had been handed down to all mankind ; grant that we may be made like unto him...

In the Name of the Father...

"It's not that I'm afraid to die – I just don't want to be there when it happens." I imagine that given the option, which sadly we're not, most of us would echo Woody Allen's famously witty aphorism about the final act of life, and stay in the dressing room or the bar while it played out in our absence. I imagine if you could apply it to the final act of the cosmos as a whole, we might all, with Allen, be even more inclined say something very similar. It's not that I'm afraid of the end of the world it's just I don't want to be there when it happens, and fingers crossed I might have a chance of achieving *that* ambition.

But what would I see if I was there? At the moment the world ended. The sky torn in two? The fabric of time and space rolled up like a garment and cast aside? The *final* curtain, but with no fanfare or applause. Just silence...and some second hand clothes? And darkness. Or that absolute absence, which darkness is the merest shadow of?

Would it be like the Beginning? Or the moment - though such a thing could not exist - immediately before the beginning - formless void?

It is difficult for us, of course, to even imagine these things, because they are literally, and by definition, beyond us. Because what lies beyond even our own births and deaths is hidden from us, and all of our other experiences of those beginnings and endings in microcosm - *are* second hand: the conception or birth of *another* person, or the impossible vanishing act of their death. And what's more they all have something before them, and something that continues after them. They have a context from which they emerge, or into which they dissolve. A context which remains like a tree putting forth blossom, or leaves, or fruit, which subsequently fall to the ground and die, only to be replaced in time by new flowers or leaves, or even new trees.

So if we think of beginning and ending at all, we are drawn to thinking in cycles - chickens and eggs - and the endless turning of the secular wheel - life and death and life again.

But this is all an illusion of course.

That fruit does not go and come back, those leaves do not return. They go. And their place is taken by new leaves, other fruit. Those flowers do not fade and bloom. They blossom and wither and are gone - to be replaced of course, but by different flowers. Always for the particular form, there is a beginning and a definitive end.

It is true that they all *are* part of something bigger, which precedes them and extends past them, but as each of these meta-layers in its turn reaches its own limit - as leaves turn and give way to the trees they came from, as trees fall and give way to landscapes, as landscapes heave and collapse into sea or molten rock, we are eventually left with only the most elemental of contexts - earth and fire and water and air - and beyond them an otherness that cannot be seen or tasted or touched, any more than in the finite span of our own lives, we can look past the waters and womb of birth, or the earth, or fire, and tomb of death...

So in these three days, and in the singular death and rebirth that is Easter, Holy Church reaches for those same elements to try and express something of the cataclysm that has happened in Christ, and of what it means for us.

We start in the darkness of this noonday, and the utter emptiness of Holy Saturday - in the abyss.

Until the darkness of that long night is split open by spark and flame.

Until the formless silence is rent by a word.

Until finally the waters are divided with the plunging into them of solid light. And on the Third Day that ground upon which we should not be able to stand emerges, as the very soil in which we will flourish forever.

But as we read over these days, accounts of the creation of the world, then of the creation of God's people, by the dividing of the waters, and the conquest of chaos and darkness; as we hear of the making of humanity, of Adam taken from the ground and animated by the breath of heaven, and of the new humanity - of the Last Adam - brought out of the earth, by the same Divine Spirit. We are called to realise that in the fire and smoke and crashing sound, in the waters and the darkness, we are only seeing what *surrounds* that absolute Otherness that is the Beginning and the End, we are only hinting at the utter catastrophe, and inconceivable miracle of Easter.

What we witness to in the events of the Triduum is nothing less comprehensive than the End of the World, and nothing less violent or alien than its Genesis.

On the Cross, the world took its last and only hope of survival - and killed it - thrust out from itself its very own life, poured into the ground the blood of the one whose offering alone could redeem it, and sealed its doom. In that moment the veil of creation was torn apart irrevocably. The final curtain. Silence. And Darkness.

And here, at that still moment, we find ourselves again.

Like the people of Israel, in the ceremony of Yom Kippur to which our reading from Hebrews points us - we stand silent and unseeing outside - whilst the action upon which our existence depends unfolds beyond the curtain.

Like the Christian Priests on every Good Friday who find themselves completely redundant at the altar - with nothing to consecrate, no elements to lift in offering.

Like all Christian people on this Good Friday who perhaps for the very first time find themselves with no ceremony to attend, no rites to enact.

Like the Christ Himself in his moment of desolation.

In this moment we acknowledge that all our seeing, all our acting, all our status as the atoned people of God, all our priesthood, all our service, all of the new life, not less than all of the old life, is derived, dependent, the initiative and activity of another, which we are helpless to elicit. We acknowledge, in short, the absolute gratuity of love.

We recognise that just as there was nothing humanity could do to bring about its own life, nothing creation could utter to summon itself into being, so the life of the world is dependent on an action it cannot perform. We confess what our first forefather forgot - that there is nothing that can be done to seize, or steal, or merit or produce the pure Gift, and source of all life, that is Love.

We acknowledge all this in our veneration of the new tree in our midst. And in our waiting. In our waiting, not in frustrated inactivity. Not in grieving desperation. Not even - for all we might be terrified by our powerlessness - in fear. But in hope.

We wait now, in the absolute silence, until there is only the darkness of Saturday night.

Until once more into that darkness a Word is spoken before we are there to hear it. Let there be light.

And that light is the light of the new world. The New Creation. Not the endless cycle of life and death. But the absolute end of death. The death of death. And the bursting forth of a new endless line, of a new limitless life.

What we have celebrated in solemn ceremony over the years - with fire and water and earth and air - is the conquest in Christ of all the elemental forces, the destruction in Christ of the old order entire, the end in Christ of the world that was, and the triumph in Christ of the eternal life of Love, the birth in Christ of the new humanity, the beginning in Christ of the world without end.

And this year we will celebrate it no less in the willed patience of our watching together, in the quiet faithfulness of our hope, in the seeming confines of our homes as we wait to hear the same question as always: Do you turn to Christ? Do you submit to Christ? Do you come to Christ?

In other words - will you count yourself among those who stay in the crumbling temple as its stones fall around them? Will you count yourself among those who cling to the dying world as it dissolves into formless emptiness? Will you count yourself among those who eek out what remains of their finite life in the spiralling cycle of secular time, as the weeks roll round 7 days after 7 days, and lull them into thinking it might last forever?

Or will you stare into the darkness of these coming hours to watch for the dawn of the first morning? Will you stand on the far side of the divide, with the baptised, at the beginning of the 8th day of Creation? Will you learn the new instincts required to inhabit a new world? Will you walk in the light of the new order? Will you live not as mere flesh unto death, but in the likeness of the resurrection unto God.

It was, as it happens, also Woody Allen who said "I don't want to achieve immortality through my works - I want to achieve it by not dying"

But he will be disappointed, ultimately on both fronts. Our dying is unshunnable - and one way or another we have to attend. And the judgement on our lives is not ultimately dependent on the balance of good and evil works in them, but on the presence or otherwise in them of the power of divine love.

Death is a given of the life we once all lived, but because of the willing death of the cross, and the new creation wrought by it on this day, death itself can now - incredibly - become a *gift*. In fact, that is the summary of the Easter call upon our lives breathed out in that finally offered breath: to join with Christ in making our whole life, and therefore our own deaths a gift - an offering - by the divine power in us of charity, so that we can, in him, be taken up into Love's everlasting life.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is both inescapably divisive - the line between the death of what was, and the birth of what will forever be; and endlessly diffusive - the widening frontier of His Kingdom - irreversibly and irresistibly making all things new. And we stand this very day on that line, waiting to hear again our invitation to enter into the limitless stream.

O God, who by the passion of our Lord, thy Christ, didst destroy the inheritance of death, which had been handed down to all mankind ; grant that we may be made like unto him ; that as we must needs bear the image of our earthly nature, so by being sanctified we may bear the image of heavenly grace. Through the same Christ our Lord..