

Lent Reflections on the Stained-Glass Windows



The West Window

Holy Saturday

Reading: John 19:38-42, 12: 23-25

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Commentary

The West window in the church is of plain glass and was always intended to be. From the sanctuary and chancel areas it affords wonderful views of the changing seasons and it fills the church with light. In fact, the church is renowned for the shafts of light from the clerestory window that come into play at various times during the day. It can be quite spectacular during Mass when the light and the incense intermingle, and the silver of the altar vessels gleam as they are raised at the consecration.

Yet Holy Saturday is not a day of light or of presence but of darkness and absence. The view through the West window is of winter, the tree bare and lifeless against the setting sun. Christ is in the tomb and the disciples are fearful and grief-stricken. This is the day that divides Calvary and the Garden, the day between Cross and Resurrection, a restless day of burial and waiting.

An ancient homily for Holy Saturday is often read on this day at Morning Prayer which addresses not just the strange and painful silence of this day after tragedy and death, but moves us into thinking about that part of the Apostles Creed which says ‘He descended into hell.’ This harrowing of Hell is often depicted in Orthodox icons as Christ bringing light and life to the dark places and raising up those of faith who had gone before.

“Something strange is happening – there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence

because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. God has died in the flesh and hell trembles with fear.

He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow the captives Adam and Eve, he who is both God and the son of Eve. The Lord approached them bearing the cross, the weapon that had won him the victory. At the sight of him, Adam, the first man he had created, struck his breast in terror and cried out to everyone: "My Lord be with you all." Christ answered him: "And with your spirit." He took him by the hand and raised him up, saying: "Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.

Meditation

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The tomb of the dead Jesus is a place of darkness and hope together. It is a symbol of how the familiar categories of our thoughts are about to be overturned. For, it turns out that darkness is not, in this case, a state in which decay and corruption hold sway; nor is it the setting for the dissolution of a unique person into the earth from which we all come, dust to dust. Instead, it is a threshold between one way of being (ordinary human life in the world) and another (eternal life, for which God destined human beings) which all of us will one day cross. Jesus

shows the way and offers that hope for which we yearn, that death is not the end of us, but only the end of our beginning.

Prayer

In life no house, no home
My Lord on earth might have
In death no friendly tomb
But what a stranger gave
What may I say?
Heaven was his home
But mine the tomb wherein he lay.

Here might I stay and sing
No story so divine
Never was love, dear King,
Never was grief like thine!
This is my Friend
In whose sweet praise
I all my days could gladly spend.