

Avoiding Easter Saturday

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The teacher and writer Alan Lewis used to talk of workshops that he'd led on the theme of Easter. The trouble was, he said, that groups were happy to talk about Good Friday but then they wanted to jump forward to Easter Day as quickly as possible. That long hiatus of Easter Saturday, when Jesus lies alone in a borrowed tomb, was to be avoided.

Was that, Alan wondered, because we simply don't like talking about death?

And yet, he said, if we believe that God lived in and through Jesus Christ then it's important for us to think not only about what was happening to Jesus, dead and buried, but what was happening to God... also dead and buried. It's a tough idea to get your head round – that God, too, experiences death on the cross and “knows how to die”.

Alan came to understand that the God's aloneness and despair on Easter Saturday is precisely that part of the Easter story that most closely mirrors so much of our own human experience. Three events of the last century, he suggests, bring into focus the sense of despair we so often feel about our world:

Auschwitz
Hiroshima
Chernobyl

... three events that represent the possibility of soulless inhumanity, a nuclear winter and, at Chernobyl, “the terrible possibility of planetary death... the ultimate eco-catastrophe”.



Derelict buildings in the aftermath of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster
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Alan asks: “Who and where is God if God's power and love can sustain such losses and accede to such defeats?” Is God uninterested, absent or dead?

OR

Does such bleakness as we often experience in the world around us, such inhumanity that screams daily from our newspapers, such injustice that we seem powerless to prevent, offer another possibility?

For Alan, despair and pessimism, “the collapse of confidence” and “the abolition of optimism” creates the possibility of a different way of looking at tomorrow: a way not of fragile, shattered optimism but of strong un-killable hope.

“For hope, finding space to flourish in the very absence of optimism, is the courage not to be swallowed by despair but, in frank acknowledgement of rampant evil and negation, to trust in the possibility for life and creativity amid and beyond that malign [super-power], though assuredly not in its denial or avoidance. The very realities which banish confidence and legitimise despair also invite a hopeful embrace of love’s living power to prevail in history.”

Alan liked to say that the only truly authentic Easter hymn was the one that begins “Now the green blade rises from the buried grain” (StF 306). It speaks of hope (not optimism) present in all our Easter Saturdays of death and despair, ready to push through and grow once more in the shape of God’s love.

The question is: if the aloneness and despair of Easter Saturday is precisely that part of the Easter story which most closely mirrors so much of our own human experience why, then, is it the part of the story that Christians most usually skip over?



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Quotations taken from *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*
by Alan E. Lewis
(published by Wm B Eerdmans Pub Co., 2001)