

“Darkness covered the face of the deep...And God said, Let there be light, and there was light.”

(Genesis 1.2-3)

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Like lovers hiding their forbidden secret, we meet mostly in the night; darkness dominates. We emerged briefly on Good Friday, but even then, at midday, darkness fell for hours “over all the land” (Luke 23.44). As a child I was satisfied only with a grey Good Friday, feeling that it was wrong for the sun to show her face. So, here we are together again, in the dark middle of the night. Thank goodness we are developing night vision. Just as Silence speaks hiddenly in many modes for the attentive, Darkness, too, shines brilliantly (Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*<sup>1</sup>) for those who have cultivated their night vision. She has many forms. I wish I could begin with the “nigra sum et formosa” (“I am black and beautiful”) of the *Song of Songs* (1.5), especially as set by Monteverdi—and yes, Paul, I also want the Big Bang from Haydn’s *Creation* at the right moment in this sermon—but, her coming to the Bridegroom in the middle of the night must be delayed for a few minutes. We have first to remember the darkness into which we walked “on the night in which he was betrayed.” That was the darkness of sin, limited only by the real weakness of its self-deceived imagination of power and by the providence of the Good.<sup>1</sup>

For night vision, we must not falsely identify darkness with sin and evil: black is beautiful, “nigra sum et formosa.” The second darkness fell when the sun hid her face, unable to look upon the death of the Son of God and Mary. The “sun’s light failed.” That awe-filled reverence is not sin. In that respectful darkness, our Beloved delivered his spirit into the hands of the Father, and descended into the darkness of death. Were we not all relieved by that blessed “It is finished”? The tortures are over. Darkness is also peace.

What of tonight’s darkness? What quality do you perceive? The Scripture and hymns awaiting us gather in the prior darkneses and even add to them, but there is a fundamental difference. The darkness of sin recurs with the Israelites lost in the desert and terrifyingly trapped between the Red Sea before them and the army of Pharaoh behind. There is the sin of Adam, the father of us all, but here strangely, it is called “blessed,” *O felix culpa*. Death’s darkness is present, both as the destructive chains of death for those imprisoned in Hell, and as the Passover plague sent on Egypt, killing all her first born, man and beast. Above all, and archetypically, giving the key which unlocks the mystery of this night, is the darkness of creation. “Darkness covered the face of the deep...And God said, Let there be light, and there was light.” (Genesis 1.2-3). That the dark mystery of this night might shine out brilliantly for us, we must recollect and unite two fundamentals: one, a truth about religion generally, and, the other, the Scriptural origination of what we celebrate tonight, Resurrection.

We begin with the Bible—with a book written in Greek but not in the New Testament. In the Second Book of Maccabees, recording the guerrilla war and victory of faithful Jews against idolatrous tyrants and Jewish collaborators, two doctrines new to the Bible appear together, the resurrection of the dead, and the creation of the world from nothing. Significantly they appear in the context of martyrdom. The connection of the three was made by a Jewish mother urging her youngest son to martyrdom (the other six had already been tortured to death before her eyes), she pleaded:

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<sup>1</sup> If Proclus, *De subsistentia malorum* and Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* are to be believed, as they ought.

I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God made them out of nothing. Humanity came to life in the same way....The Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind, and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again since you now forget yourself for the sake of his laws. (2 Maccabees 7.28 & 23)

The great historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, places Easter within a universal religious pattern: the regeneration of time each year when the creation is made actual again. Annually, in the darkness of degeneration, disorder, darkness, and death, the original creation out of chaos reforms the cosmos.<sup>2</sup> This week our Iranian neighbours in this city made the year new by leaping through the fire. Here and now a new fire will be kindled and become a pillar of light, leading us. When the fiery pillar, which also led the lost people of God to safety and freedom through the Red Sea, stands up as the Immortal Light of the Resurrected Christ radiant in our midst, our deacon will sing: *Haec est nox. This is the night*: “Exult now angel choirs...Be glad, O earth...Rejoice Mother Church.”<sup>3</sup> In this hour and in this place, the eternal renewal happens. *This is the night* of the new song (Psalms 96 & 98). *This Night* of Resurrection is our Night of Creation. *This is the night* when, by renewal of our baptism, we pass through the waters of the Red Sea, waters no more threatening death but cleansing life. *This is the night* when the darkness of the infernal places can hold its prisoners no more, because Christ, harrowing Hell, rose again in triumph. *This is the night* of the Passover, when the Lamb, slain from the foundation of the world, pays the price which redeems his people from death. *This is the night* when resurrected life from our saviour makes the sin which brought him into the world seem *felix*, fortunate, happy. *This is the night* of chaotic darkness when “God said, Let there be light, and there was light.” The blackness of such a night is beautiful, *formosa: nigra sum et formosa*. “Even the darkness is no darkness with thee, but the night is as clear as the day.” (Psalm 139.11)

This night we are a new creation. The old heaven and the old earth have passed away; “behold, all things have become new.” (2 Corinthians 5.17) There is “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21.1). This is the resurrection of the body. Humanity, earth, air, fire and water, the elements, we and the cosmos, are made new together, or none are. “I believe in the Resurrection of the Body.” Every ritual of tonight, especially the most weird, repeats this truth: we and the cosmos are made new together or not at all. Listen again to our Jewish mother, she, of course, has it right: “look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God made them out of nothing. Humanity came to life in the same way.”

The Resurrection, our re-creation, is the action of every Eucharist and especially of this one. At its centre is a very old prayer, said secretly by the priest when he mingles a drop of water with the wine. The Wine signifying divinity absorbs humanity signified by water. The priest prays:

God, who wonderfully created (*condidisti*) the dignity of human substance and yet more wonderfully remade it (*reformasti*), give to us, through the mystery of this water and wine, that we may be consorts (*consortes*) of the divinity of Jesus Christ who found us worthy to become part of our humanity.<sup>4</sup>

The secret is out: consorts of his divinity; these lovers will hold the divinity of the Son of God as their common property. Like lovers hiding their forbidden secret, we meet mostly in the night. This night we know why.

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<sup>2</sup> *Cosmos and History. The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper, 1954), 51-72.

<sup>3</sup> Paschal Praeconium.

<sup>4</sup> *Missale Romanum* (Pius V).