

Holy Saturday

I wonder as you read through familiar passages of scripture if you have ever come across something that's always been there but that you've never noticed before. This happened to me this year as I read through the passion stories.

In Matthew's account of the passion, as Judas approaches Jesus in the garden, the words Jesus uses as he greets him are "Friend, do what you are here to do".

I've never really noticed that word 'friend' before.

But it's quite something isn't it?

Here Jesus is about to be betrayed by one of his followers. Judas, who has been close to him for three years, who has been listening to his teaching and sharing his life is about to hand him over to the priests and religious leaders to be tried and crucified. And yet Jesus calls him Friend.

It reminded me of something I heard a young person saying once in answer to the question "what was Jesus doing between Good Friday and Easter Day?" This young person said "he was searching the coldest, darkest corners of hell, seeking out his friend Judas, to bring him home".

An ancient tradition of the church and Christian belief is that during the time between his death and resurrection Jesus descended to the place of the dead. One of the creeds – the apostles creed expresses this well – he was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead.

And the tradition (as referred to in the first letter of Peter) is that he did this to bring life to all who had died in the past generations. To extend the love and mercy of God to all.

This image of Jesus bringing life to the long dead is known in tradition as the harrowing of hell, and it reminds us that there is nowhere in time nor space, no depth of hell that us beyond the reach of God. God in Christ can bring life to the toughest and most unlikely of situations.

To harrow is a farming term, meaning to rake or hoe, to break up the hardened ground to create a soil in which seeds can germinate and grow and thrive.

When we are in the darkest of dark places; when we are overwhelmed with sadness and loss; when we experience despair or depression, we can take this tradition as a promise for us.

God in Christ can harrow even our deepest, darkest times. He can break up our hardened selves and make it possible for new seeds, new life, new hope, new opportunities to grow in us. To give us that new start – not by replacing the pain and sadness, but by transforming it.

Not by disposing of the dark and desperate experiences, but by working through those experiences to create the environment for hope and life to thrive.

So I now invite you to lay down the burdens you have been carrying, to hand them over to God and ask him to harrow you and transform you so that new shoots of life and hope can emerge in your life.

*Christ whom death could not contain
roll away the heavy stone of our grief and sadness.
Harrow all that has become hardened in us and
open our hearts to the possibilities of new life.
Father, Son and Spirit,
bless us in unexpected ways
with your gift of resurrection life. Amen*