

**Living with Jesus in Liminality:
An Invitation to 'Be Dead with the Dead God.'**

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Abstract

There are moments, sometimes long extended, when life seems to drop into a kind of suspended state. There, a memory of a past which has form and intelligence can be found, but the simplicity of life has passed away and no shape or meaning has yet replaced it. This moment of 'liminality' is an *apophatic* state of continuous present. We have only the memory of ourselves, God and our world; what we used to know in the past but are unable to know with the conviction for the present. On Holy Saturday there is similarly no human form or constructs; the Incarnated God has passed away. And while faith prompts hope that there might be a further movement to the story, any future is not yet foreseeable. There is nothing to do here but lie in the tomb with Jesus. It is "betwixt and between," a moment of liminality. The Christian hope in this story is that there is nothing to do but wait. Wait for the Lord's resurrection. Wait for God to act. If one waits for the Lord's rescue, the tomb can be transcended. This essay explores the nature of liminality as a descriptor of life in transition in relation to individual psycho-spiritual states, Christian ritual and the present socio-cultural shift in Western society. It then considers the spiritual lessons of Holy Saturday to ask: how is the Christian to live in such a moment? What rules still apply? What is the invitation? I conclude that moments of liminality invite the Christian to "be dead with the dead God" (Von Balthasar 1990, 181).

I Awake Suddenly (by Alister Pate [Pate 2011, 10]).

I awake suddenly with a start. It is dark as death. Dark, and terribly late at night. The sky is filled with barely visible clouds whipping across the void.

I am standing on a hillside, almost a cliff, a sheer tumbling down, plummeting down to the pitch black water. I sense rather than see the saltbush and stunted shrubs that cling for dear life against the sea, churning so far below.

The air is full of the roar of the waves, grinding and casting and moaning against the rocks far beneath, bellowing and sighing, as though great Behemoth were gnawing away at the precarious handhold life has here, trying to drag it, spinning and circling, into its foaming maw. I can smell the salt fresh of the air, the tang of it, sea spray ice-cold across my face.

Across the black sea, made velvet by height, shines the moon, huge by the horizon. It is as though she has drawn close for some oblique, esoteric reason of her own, casting her light like a highway.

There is hope, then, but mediated. If the sun were risen, how different it would be. I wrap my arms around my body, holding in my life-heat. It is still deep night, as though the sun were dead, leaving only an unreliable memory, were it not for the moon, relaying his light – reflected, lessened. A token, a remembrance, of hope then, rather than the hope itself. Just enough to see the next step by; not enough to warm me.

I have to move, to walk. I can barely see the faintest of paths, rocky, muddy, treacherous. If I slip, if I miss my footing, then I will join the rocks and be consumed by the all-devouring mouth of the sea.

But move I must. To stay here is death as well, ossifying in the despairing cold. Though I can barely see, there is just enough light to walk the next step of the path, hesitantly and with painful delicacy, gripping onto plants, as they loom out of the night, revealing their branches against the dim sky.

As I walk, following the dim path carefully, painstakingly, along the cliff edge, I have a subtle sense that, though I can see no-one through the black, and hear no-one past the inexorable crash and roar of the sea, I am not alone. Someone has walked this path before. And the faintest echo of laughter, the scent of the best wine kept for last, a fragment of sun-warmed dust seems to brush against my skin. The faintest of hopes, when hope seems lost.

I walk.

PART ONE: LIMINALITY

David Tracy uses the concept of ‘limit situation’ to describe what I am calling liminality. “Fundamentally, the concept refers to those human situations wherein a human being ineluctably finds manifest a certain ultimate limit or horizon to his or her existence” (Tracy 1996, 105). They can be either positive (e.g., love, joy, hope) or negative (e.g., grief, anxiety, depression) but they take us into a disturbing place of feeling, experiencing, knowing the limitations of our human capacity. The negative situations envisioned by Tracy are the “boundary situations” first described by Karl Jaspers. “An invisible line, anonymous and ambiguous, easy to ignore and belonging nowhere. Yet it exists to create identity and to assign belonging. The division it marks—visibly with a wall, invisibly with a map line—actually creates entities on either side, by at once separating and relating them” (Lewis 2001, 41).

Hence, liminality is a strange “no man’s land” between two walls of definition. It is an *apophatic* experience of loss and deconstruction—betwixt and between. The old has gone but the new has not yet arrived and so the now is existentially opaque. Liminality is not equal to a great void of nothingness, though it may lead into that if the experience is not resolved or managed in an appropriate way. Rather, the liminal moment is essentially transitional. We encounter it when our limits have been reached—when the old dies. We exit it when the new day has dawned, when new possibilities have been presented to us. The human person cannot choose to go forward, because they have reached the limit of their own capacity. To experience human finitude is to experience a moment of powerlessness.

1. Liminality as Psycho-Spiritual State

i. Encountering the Divine

Many spiritual writers refer to the psycho-spiritual state of liminality as the ideal place for spiritual growth and connection with the divine. “All human transformation takes place inside liminal space . . .

If God wants to get to you, which God always does, the chances are best during any liminal time” (Rohr 2010, 224). Sebastian Moore talks about contemplative silence as the most explicit form of liminal experience there is: dropping into the void by which we encounter God and ourselves. Such an encounter has the capacity to “be the beginning of new life” (Moore 2008). Liminality in this encounter indicates the great gap between created being and eternal being. It is that moment when we are confronted with our finite humanity and God’s infinite divinity.

Liminality does not promise a specific encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ, the explicit representation of the divine being whom Christians worship, but rather the mysterious God who is the foundation for all being. So for many people, encountering the divine in liminality is prior to, or even entirely separate from, knowledge of God in Jesus. In this sense, the encounter with the divine is universally available to all human beings, it is imbedded in the nature of *Imago Dei*. It is “what can be known about God . . . since the creation of the world” (Romans 1:19, 20), the God-shaped longing and human conscience operating within every heart. For those who have ears to hear, the liminal moment leads into an openness for encounter with the Lord both mysterious and incarnated.

Liminality is St. John of The Cross’s “dark night of the soul” properly understood. For what is on view there is the experience of encountering one’s limits. Rowan Williams describes it with characteristic lucidity. It might be reached in different ways, but the moment is one of the breakdown of order, schemes and maps. “The ‘night of the spirit’ or ‘night of the soul’ is often thought of as another kind of religious experience, a very exalted, very painful, very dramatic mystical sharing in the sufferings of Christ, or something of that sort. But the truth is, alas, that it is simpler, and much more alarming. It is the end of religious experience, the very opposite of mysticism. It is a wall in the way, as Job says, it is the evacuation of meaning. We have been going round and round the paths, and suddenly we see that our path goes round a hole, a bottomless black pit. In the middle of all our religious constructs—if we have the honesty to look at it—is an emptiness.” (from his sermon, ‘The Dark Night’ in Williams 1994, 96). When Williams notes that liminality is the ‘opposite of mysticism’ we are introduced to an important clarification. Liminality is a universal human experience which is fertile ground for an encounter with the Divine, but that encounter is something post-liminal. By definition, a new encounter with the Divine transgresses the border of human limits and ends the moment of liminality. This distinction becomes important later in this essay as we consider the Spirituality of Holy Saturday.

ii. *Encountering Self*

This process of individuation frequently hinges on a particular turning point in the middle of one’s life. A ‘mid-life crisis’ is more than being confronted with one’s own fallibility and a desire to make the most of one’s time left, it is an oft painful experience of fully “growing up.” This turn, or transition, is again a point of liminality. Richard Rohr shows how this mid-life liminality is essential to mature humanity in his book *Falling Upward: Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. “Church membership requirements, church doctrine, and church morality force almost all issues to an inner boiling point, where you are

forced to face important issues at a much deeper level to survive as a Catholic or a Christian, or even as a human” (Rohr 2011, 73). Carl Jung believed that “one cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life’s morning for what was great in the morning will be of little importance in the evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie” (cited in Rohr 2011, 1). That is, when we fail to grow up, we become absurd in our immaturity.

Jungian psychotherapist and writer Edward Edinger explains that when the socially constructed ego is put under strain, because it has reached the limits of its capacity to adequately account for the lived experience of human life, it either collapses to give way to mid-life transition or it starts feeding off itself (Edinger 1972). The ego is a representation of the subjective self—the story we have created for ourselves to explain who we think we should be. It has evolved in relation to the wider world and hence, often represents the socialised idea of self and its consequent behaviours and choices. One cannot examine the ego and find an objective representation of the ‘tradition’ or replay the exact and full record of a person’s life, but rather one finds a subjectively filtered, unintegrated self-serving version of that life. Within the inner life of a human being, our conscious, subjective, self-understanding (ego) is in dynamic relationship with the entire, objective human person—conscious and unconscious (self). Sometimes the ego suffers from inflation—we think of ourselves more grandly than we ought (sounds very like the apostle Paul); sometimes the ego suffers from alienation—we do not know ourselves as we ought (like the experience of the psalmist in Psalm 35 when he cannot work out what God is doing in his life). As life prods and pokes us, we gradually move towards the right balance where the ego is in harmony with the self. Jungians call this process of individuation.

2. Liminality as Ritual

In the 1960s, the anthropologist Victor Turner expanded the work of Arnold Van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* (1909) to extensively examine liminality in ritual. He discovered that ritual liminality defines the location of individuals within a social system. On the one hand this might mediate a transition in social status, for example, from childhood to adulthood. However, it might also consolidate continuing social structures by ritualising temporary role reversal. For example, many cultures have playful rituals wherein someone lowly gets to be “chief for a day.” The persons of these rituals become liminal entities “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial . . . Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon” (Turner 1969, 95).

In relation to Christian practise, it is easy to see how the ‘Occasional Services’ of baptism, confirmation, weddings and funerals are, conceptually at least, transitional rites of passage. These rites, performed well, have the capacity to be powerful moments in the lives of those who participate. David Hogue illustrates this well in his considerations of a Christian funeral rite. He identified “at least

six characteristics common to radical life transitions across cultures [that] have played significant roles in shaping the Christian funeral” (Hogue 2006, 5). The liminality within a funeral rite:

- constructs “time out of time,”
- serves as a container for intense and complex emotions,
- paradoxically requires both isolation and community,
- is a time of remembering and restructuring memories,
- is temporary, and
- restructures social relationships.

At the close of a funeral, both the living and dead are in a new place. As we journey with the dead, transgressing the boundary between life and dead, we journey with each other over the border from the old life where that person who present to the new life where they are absent. The funeral rite, as with all the rites of passage, lays down pathways for liminality because “crossing thresholds is the way of all life” (Hogue 2006, 5).

Christian Churches that follow the discipline of a Church Calendar tend to have greater opportunities for transformative, transitional liminality in their rituals. In particular, the seasons of waiting—Advent and Lent—mimic some of the characteristics of a transitional liminal state. In *Darkness Yielding*, a collection of Advent and Easter reflections written for newspaper publication in Britain, Rowan Williams describes a desire by the various authors to give ‘seasonal shape’ to a society that has lost touch with seasons of any sort. They persevere with this task in a post-Christian era because “it’s worth it if it continues to suggest to a wider public that time is indeed ‘framed’ by something, that the passing of days and years isn’t ultimately through a featureless landscape” (Cotter 2001, xi).

There are aspects of the weekly Sabbath that fit into the description of liminal transition which Turner observed in his study of ritual, but then there are other aspects that do not. For example, the suspension of time which is key to Sabbath practice, stands in between the work of one week and the work of another. However, there is no social (or other) transition complicit in the moment. Furthermore, the Sabbath is best understood as full of theological content rather than emptied of it. As Dan Allender notes in his book on Sabbath as a spiritual practice, “the Sabbath is a day when the kingdom to come has come and is celebrated now rather than anticipated tomorrow” (Allender 2009, 12). The injunction to Rest looks liminal—the stripping away of tasks, and yet the Sabbath Rest was a celebration of the completed Creation process and each weekly event is a prefiguring of the final completion of a New Creation, rather than a middle moment betwixt and between. So Sabbath cannot be neatly claimed as reoccurring liminal phenomena.

3. Liminality as Socio-Cultural Transition (Postmodernity)

It is widely agreed that Western Culture (and Church culture as a consequence) is in transition. Postmodernism as a philosophical and cultural period is variously dated from around the 1960s and Victor Turner was already able to discern something of the shift. “What appears to have happened [in

Western Society] is that with the increasing specialization of society and culture, with progressive complexity in the social division of labour, what was in tribal society principally a set of transitional qualities 'betwixt and between' defined states of culture and society has become itself an institutionalized state" (Turner 1969, 107). One might focus on technological change, the politico-economic restructuring of the world, cultural shifts and the philosophy underlying it and draw different conclusions as to whether postmodernity is a continuity or a break from the previous epoch of modernism (Cowdell 2004, 14). What is clear is that postmodernity as a whole can be very adequately described by the definitions of liminality offered in this essay (e.g., Frost 2004).

i. *Christianity in Transition*

The place of religion in western culture has irrevocably shifted. Three perspectives on Australian religiosity and spirituality in recent years, each with a slightly different interpretation of our culture, show something of the fragmented nature of religion within the social structures of Australian society. Gary Bouma thinks that there is a 'low temperature' culture of religion that is still influential in the Australian psyche (Bouma 2006, 2). David Tacey thinks that there is a kind of spiritual revolution going on where Australians are rejecting religion but not spirituality (Tacey 2000). Tom Frame argues that most Australians are, philosophically at least, predominantly secular (Frame 2009). Research from the Christian Research Association suggests that there is evidence to support all three perspectives. Just under half of all Australians would be happy to call themselves spiritual, religious or both. What is meant by those terms, however, varies a great deal: less than half of this group would walk into a church building. The other half of Australians are happy to say they have no religion, but only around 15% of this group intend this as a definitive statement about God or metaphysical realities. That is, most people who have no religion do so because they don't care or don't know enough about it (Hughes 2010), (Kaldor 2010).

In Turner's categories, the decline of religion represents a loss of ritual that might construct social identity. Without the transition rituals, the whole of Western society seems to have plunged into liminality. Edward Edinger, along with many writers in the area of Mythology and Culture, argues that archetypal human patterns of being and behaviour interact at a social level in 'supra personal categories' operating at the level of the soul or unconscious self. Hence, our cultural crisis is essentially spiritual and religious. In society, individuals share externalised projections of their inner beings collectively. It is how we may live together in peace and harmony, by a structured, shared, "authorised version" of reality that gives meaning and form to our individual selves. If the shared meaning system of a society breaks down, as is the case with religion in the West, individuals have a problem. It is not just that an individual suffers from a lack of meaningful relationships with others who share the same beliefs; the individual suffers from the lack of an externalised expression of their core beliefs, many of which are held unconsciously. When we can glimpse parts of our deepest selves projected into the public sphere, it is as a kind of mirror in which to gain perspective on one's true and full self. Without religion, individuals are drawn into a spiritual quest to know the mystery of their own

soul. In other words, the increase in spirituality in Western Culture, is a direct psychological consequence of the fragmentation of religion as a social construct.

The declining influence of the Institutionalised Church in the West must be seen within this wider fragmentation of religion. Christendom, simply understood, was a socially constructed relationship between Church and Society. It is a relationship that is now broken—the world has walked out and left the Church to single parent its people on her own “No longer are the Churches and their leaders the repository of moral value, chief agents of social cohesion, the focus of nurture and compassion, or the key providers of ritual reinforcement at life’s turning points—be they personal, communal or national” (Cowdell 2004, 41). Phyllis Tickle has argued that Christianity (and before it the Hebrew religion) has a habit of renewing itself every 500 years. In other words, the cultural changes evident in the Church in the twenty-first century should be interpreted as a major transition into a new era of Christianity (Tickle 2008). This is the very definition of liminality: the loss of social status; the end of one era without orientation into another; deconstructed roles and responsibilities.

ii. *The ‘Emerging’ Church*

There are movements within contemporary Western Christianity which aim to give expression to postmodern liminality. Under one very diffuse banner, a variety of renewal and renewing expressions of Christianity are emerging from genuine attempts to discern what it is to live in postmodern liminality. Scott Bader-Saye argues that the best way to understand the Emerging Church Movement is to view it as ‘improvisation’ in an evolving culture (Bader-Saye 2006). Peter Neilson has used a developmental model to locate the emerging church movement in a ‘re-evaluation’ stage (Neilson 2006). Ian Mobsby argues the movement is best categorized and understood in relation to the postmodern movements themselves (Mobsby 2007). All of these definitions attempt to acknowledge the transitional, evolving, and thereby liminal nature of the emerging church.

Victor Turner’s work has become a popular resource to describe some of what is going on in this movement. For example, Mike Frost has given Turner’s concept of *communitas* extensive consideration in his book *Exiles*. “Turner’s concept of *communitas* denotes an intense feeling of social togetherness and belonging, often in connection with religious rituals, in which people stand together ‘outside’ society, and society is strengthened by this” (Frost 2006, 110). Such an experience of spontaneous community is a powerful, transformative experience and often sought, but rarely achieved, because it is dependent on an unpredictable and unsustainable shared experience of liminality.

Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or ‘holy’ possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the

norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency. (Turner 1969, 128).

Frost applies this to the experience of many for whom the Institutional Church is 'dead'. "Exiles are in a liminal state. In fact, liminality defines totally the experience of exile. Those of us who have come out of the mainstream church find ourselves, like the escaping rabbits from *Watership Down*. We have been thrown together with other fellow travellers, and we're on the road, not knowing entirely what will happen" (Frost 2006, 112).

Robert Webber's *Ancient Future Faith* introduced an iconic catchphrase for the emerging church movement—*Ancient: Future* (Webber 1999). The interest in ancient spiritual practices mirrors the deconstruction of ritual in our wider culture. From new communities exploring postmodern expressions of rhythm of life (Cray 2010) to the reintroduction of liturgical ritual in Baptist circles (Pierson 2010, 78ff), there is a recognition that ancient spiritual practices can provide a framework for living where Western consumer culture provides none (McLaren 2008). This is coupled with a turn towards postmodern mysticism (Cowdell 2004, 92ff). Alasdair MacIntyre's words at the close of *After Virtue* are oft-quoted in the New Monasticism Movement: "We are waiting not for a Godot but for another—and doubtless very different—St. Benedict" (Wilson-Hartgrove 2008).

PART TWO: THE MIDDLE MOMENT

1. The Hermeneutical Circle

i. Ricoeur

Paul Ricoeur developed a three step hermeneutical circle whereby "you must understand in order to believe, but you must believe in order to understand" (Ricoeur 1974, 298). The first stage is that of "simple phenomenology"—a recognition of the symbols—a mapping of the terrain. It is a surface reading with its own internal coherence so it can be read on its own but a deeper stage of understanding beckons persistently for those dissatisfied with a surface approach to meaning. The symbols beg deciphering and this is the second stage of the process—a mapping of the reality to which the map refers. Once we see the image of that further reality the third arc of the circle may commence, that of reflection upon the symbols. "I am convinced that we must think, not behind the symbols but starting from symbols according to symbols, that their substance is indestructible that they constitute the revealing substrate of speech which lives among men." The middle phase is again critical. "The second immediacy, the second naïveté that we are after, is accessible only in hermeneutics; we can believe only by interpreting" (Ricoeur 1974, 298).

Intellectual liminality occurs not because the symbols have changed or been lost or altered, but rather because the interpretative understanding that provides the connection between the symbol and its meaning has collapsed. This experience is formless but bounded. We are glimpsing something beyond our limited selves to which human logos is incapable of giving full expression. Ricoeur

recognises the existential discomfort of the middle moment of critique and the necessity for it to either give way to a *second naïveté* or scramble back to belief without understanding. The alternative is to get stuck in the void of critique which leads to Nietzsche's existential pessimism or psychological insanity. Transitioning through the void requires critical skill if one is to move forward. Hence, even within the dark, shapelessness of unknowing, there is a particular intelligence at work: liminal intelligence.

ii. *Lonergan*

Bernard Lonergan's philosophical work on consciousness and conversion extends our understanding of this "liminal intelligence." Lonergan attempts to give shape to that "dynamism of our conscious intending, promoting us from mere experiencing towards understanding, from mere understanding towards truth and reality, from factual knowledge to responsible action" (Lonergan 1973, 11). Intelligence flows through three distinct moments from undifferentiated meaning, through theoretically constructed meaning, into interiority (integrated knowing). In this framework, the middle moment is dominated by questions. It is an intellectually busy time: experimenting with amalgams of critiques and constructs, piecing them together to see whether the shape fits. Liminal intelligence is not yet systematic, it is chaotic, spontaneous, dynamic—like all the best conversations where the questions are of more interest than the answers!

From Lonergan, we learn that the tasks of liminal intelligence involve:

- (1) experiencing one's experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding, (2) understanding the unity and relations of one's experienced experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding, (3) affirming the reality of one's experienced and understood experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding and (4) deciding to operate in accord with the norms immanent in the spontaneous relatedness of one's experienced, understood, affirmed experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding. (Lonergan 1973, 15).

Intelligent reflection upon one's experience, by the construction of certain analytical frameworks that can order and interpret that experience, requires patience and humility—both of which come from acknowledging our own limits. It is unhurried intelligence that draws information from the margins of one's consciousness, refuses premature synthesis and integrates all experiential information the human person has to offer—emotional, physical, auditory, visual and so on. The critical process of questioning draws our liminal sensing into conscious intelligence. "Human knowing includes experiencing but adds to it scrutiny, insight, conception, naming, reflection, checking, judging" (Lonergan 2004, 39)—a process Lonergan famously explicates through the metaphor of Being-in-Love. It is a kind of liminal intelligence described well by Andrew Louth as he argues for a mystical approach to intelligent theology:

- A division between the rational, communicable but superficial, and the intuitive, which moves us and determines our will, but which is incommunicable—a division between the objective and the subjective as Kierkegaard understood that distinction- resolved at the level of the

saint, or more exactly at the level of the saintly life, resolved not in a concept, but in a life, or an act, or a succession of acts, acts which are lived not in a clarity they attain to, but through a darkness and confusion of 'dim apprehension'. (Louth 1985, 136).

2. Deconstructing Faith

If the Psalms are 'an anatomy of soul' (Calvin) then we may draw upon Walter Brueggemann's analysis of the Psalms as a reflection upon universal human experience. Brueggemann describes a three-fold movement that begins with a pre-existing state of 'orientation'- of knowing one's place in the world as God's person; relationally connected within an established common family and community system. But then, something happens. In Israel's history the "something" is exile—desert wanderings, unfulfilled promises—and the experience catapults the people of God into a new stage of 'disorientation'. Here God is silent, though the believer cries out. The old certainties are lost. Confusion abounds. Brueggemann argues that for the Jewish people in the Psalms "disorientation is not viewed as a faceless situation nor as a passage, but as a trouble in the relationship" (Brueggemann 1984, 88). This is the moment of liminality. Just as the lament Psalms persistently return to praise the Lord, so too does Israel's story continue to resolve itself into some new re-orientation. The people of God are made new with God's heart placed within them (Ezekiel 37). This reorientation does not deny the disorientation but claims all of the pain and longing to make something new. This is Israel's experience of life with God and therein is clearly discernible in two decisive moves of faith—one into chaos and one out of chaos:

Human life is not simply an articulation of place in which we find ourselves. It is also a movement from one circumstance to another, changing and being changed, finding ourselves surprised by a new circumstance we did not expect, resistant to a new place, clinging desperately to the old circumstance. (Brueggemann 1984, 19-20).

It is not that the whole of the religious life is lived in liminality, but rather that liminal moments and movements are an essential element to a constantly unfolding encounter with God. There is an ebb and flow to life—a movement towards disorientation and a movement away from disorientation. This is helpful to describe the sometimes obtuse function of liminal boundaries. The progression into and out of liminality is just as frequently a slow progression as it is a decisive moment.

Deconstructing and reconstructing the Christian Tradition with liminal intelligence is a key theological resource for the church in transition. Rowan Williams illustrates its capacity in his hermeneutical method:

Christian reflection takes as normative a story of response to God in the world and the world in God, the record of Israel and Jesus. In that record, what is shown is the way in which imperfect, distorting responses to God so consistently generate their own re-formation, as they seek to conform to the reality of what it is and was that called them forth, that they finally issue in a response wholly transparent to the reality of the calling; and this culminating response creates a frame of reference, a grammar of human possibilities, believed to be of

unrestricted significance, an accessible resource for conversion or transformation in any human circumstance. (Williams 2000, 7).

Jonathan Wilson argues that a similar reconstructive project is required for the entire inherited Christian tradition. “For the church to be a community, we must learn to live with our history, in a morally fragmented culture, amid the failure of the Enlightenment project. In order to do this we must reclaim our understanding of the human *telos* revealed in the gospel, participate in the living tradition of Christian faith, and embody that *telos* and that tradition in our practices and virtues (character)” (Wilson 1997, 65). Wilson is drawing on Alistair MacIntyre’s ethical epistemology which argues for a postmodern hermeneutic of tradition that incorporates critical engagement and synthesis. A living tradition “is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the [moral] goods which constitute that tradition” (MacIntyre in Wilson 1997, 59). In other words, the tradition provides another coherent symbolic system to which the middle interpretive movement of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic circle may be applied.

3. Eschatology

When Ian Markham identifies the major trends of Anglican Theology today, he notes a renewed interest in Mystical and Contemplative theologies in writers such as Sarah Coakley, Mark McIntosh and Rowan Williams (whom he honours with a theological trend unto himself!) (Markham 2011). This theological development is not incidental, for Spiritual Theology provides an eschatological shape that can accommodate liminality. There has also been an increasing interest in the Eastern Church Fathers in Western Theology as theologians go about the task of disentangling Christian doctrine of Enlightenment foundationalism.

Technically speaking, eschatology is the study of the ‘end times’ the final movement in God’s Creative Activity. However, the definition of eschatology has drifted to incorporate the metanarrative of God’s activity for, when it comes to the end times, we can speak only from the liminal place. Hence, an apophatic approach to theology can be viewed as an example of liminal intelligence. “In our era’s dispossession of ‘God,’ we may at last be free to discover the mystical presence of the true and living God” (McIntosh 1998, 123). Honesty about our subjective limitations (the essence of the postmodern philosophical project) leads us into a fruitful ‘formlessness’ of theological propositions.

God hides in God’s invisibility, realising that revelation embraces concealment at one and the same time as it embraces manifestation and that our various interpretations of revelation will always be provisional, fragile and fragmentary . . . Even the revealed side of God is mysterious. (Rollins 2006, 18).

Interestingly, an Eastern eschatology leads us to another three-fold movement. The human journey is mapped from original creation in divine being; through the separation of humanity from God due the effects of sin (an act of will); and the reintegration into the divine being through the process of theosis. For both Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius, Moses’ Ascent of Mount Sinai models a journey towards

meeting God that moves from the darkness of unknowing, to the darkness beyond light (Dionysius) or the 'luminous darkness' (Gregory) (Jones 2011, 49). For Gregory, this is a linear progression into holiness, which in turn enables a greater communion with the Divine. But for Dionysius, who understood the relationship between the Self and the Divine to be more constitutive, the 'time to come' is a more dynamic process depicting "the cyclical, eternal movement of God, rather than a linear history of creation, history, and it's end" (Jones 2011, 70). This distinction reveals different observations about liminality in time and space. In a linear progression model, the whole of human existence is liminal, as we await the consummative knowing and community after death. In a cyclical model, there will be moments of liminality through-out life and moments of integrated and great insight.

PART THREE: HOLY SATURDAY SPIRITUALITY

1. A Pregnant Pause

The Christian Faith is essentially the Faith of the Resurrection: those who knew Jesus as a man walking this earth would not have told and retold the events of his life, had they not been totally transformed by their encounter with the dead-now-risen Lord Jesus (Alison 1993, 5). All that we know about Jesus is passed on to us by people who have experienced the Resurrection and know that the life and death of Jesus Christ of Nazareth is not the end of the story. We receive what has been passed on to us, just as the Apostle Paul has said, "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve . . ." (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).

In the Apostolic witness, the first Holy Saturday is remembered by its absence. Some of the first disciples saw the body in the tomb late in the day immediately before the Sabbath, then some of his disciples saw the tomb without his body, early in the day immediately after the Sabbath. The actual Sabbath day is missing in the narrative and we can only infer that the disciples proceeded with Sabbath observance as was customary. So also, Holy Saturday is absent in the Paschal Triduum Liturgies. "Holy Saturday is the truth of our lives, so close to where we are that it serves as the heart of the paschal liturgies but is itself, as the nature of the divine-human encounter, a mystery beyond even the power of liturgy to encode" (Farwell 2005, 69). The Saturday Evening Vigil technically takes place on the Sunday (because Sabbath starts at sundown) and only alludes to the prior moment of waiting, the expectant hope of the Christian who already knows that Resurrection Day is coming. It is this absence of word and action on Holy Saturday that distinguish it as day of liminality.

If the activity, or lack thereof, on the Sabbath day can be inferred, so too can the affectual experience of the first disciples. All their hope had been placed in the man Jesus but his execution essentially brought that to an end. The disciples dispersed, Peter denied even knowing his beloved Rabbi, Joseph of Arimathea looked after the necessary burial arrangements in secret, and the women seem to have done what needed to be done without comment. It is impossible to imagine that they were not

dejected. Alan Lewis has noted that the pregnant pause in the middle of the Passion-Easter narrative acts as a boundary “which allows the mind and heart easy movement and a fertile cross-reference between the two. For the first-time traveller, however, the boundary is a frontier-barrier obstructing forward progress” (Lewis 2001, 43). For the first disciples, Holy Saturday was the end. “So we have not really listened to the gospel story of the cross and grave until we have construed this cold, dark Sabbath as the day of atheism” (Lewis 2001, 56).

This distinction between the first disciples and all other believers who encounter Jesus through their later testimony is significant. Christians know Holy Saturday is not the end of the story because Jesus is encountered only as the Risen Lord. For believers, liminality on Holy Saturday is not a natural consequence of reading the Jesus narrative, it is a result of getting lost. We have the simple outline presented to us: Jesus lived, died and rose again. But then something in life brings us to our limits and we become disoriented. We forget part, or all, of the story. We cannot match the meaning of the story with the testimony of our own lives, the symbols have become detached from their meanings and cease to make sense. If we lose our way, we regress to the testimony of those traversing of the story in real time: a day of despair when God had not yet turned things upside down.

In his discussion on Resurrection, Rowan Williams describes how the experience of liminality is integral to encountering God in the dead-now-living Jesus on Easter. Encountering Jesus who is ‘wholly other’ in the Resurrection draws us into a liminal moment in which we no longer fully understand life, death and where to locate God and ourselves. “The resurrection can and should operate as a central symbol for the purification of desire and the de-centring of the ego, because the necessary first moment in the resurrection event is one of absence and loss” (Williams 1982, 77).

The pregnant pause in the narrative is a confrontation. Do we read the dramatic placing of Christ in the grave as the end of the story? Put the book down and descend ourselves into hopelessness? Or do we choose to lie ourselves down in the tomb next to Jesus and trust, however blindly, that something mysterious, beyond our current capacity to describe or define, will bring about an ecstatic finale? Imaginatively placing ourselves into the narrative as the first disciples illuminates the story for us, but it is not the way of discipleship. We follow the way of Jesus when we choose to attach ourselves wholly to him which means following him through the grave. This is von Balthasar’s question: how does the Christian accompany Jesus through the supreme solitude of Holy Saturday? How do we share in “being dead with the dead God” (Balthasar 1990, 181).

2. Solidarity with Human Solitude

“In that same way that, upon the earth, he was in solidarity with the living, so, in the tomb, he is in solidarity with the dead” (Balthasar 1990, 149). For von Balthasar, Jesus descent into death is the last leg of the Incarnation—the completion of Jesus’ human form and the key to understanding Holy Saturday. There is but one text in the New Testament about Jesus time in death—the exegetically

difficult 1 Peter 3:19 'preaching the gospel to those in prison'—but by the fourth century there was enough speculation about his underworld experience for it to make it into the creeds with the line 'He descended into Hell.' Von Balthasar argues that whatever speculative suggestions we make about hell and Jesus 'descent,' we must not deny the completeness of his death. "It is a situation which signifies in the first place the abandonment of all spontaneous activity and so a passivity, a state in which, perhaps, the vital activity now brought to its end is mysteriously summed up" (Balthasar 1990, 149). What we can say with theological clarity here is that the result of Jesus' death was the sure communication of the gospel to all humanity, across all time and space. Von Balthasar expresses this poetically in this imaginary conversation between Christ and the human person:

You leap down from a high cliff. The leap is freely made, and yet, the moment you leap, gravity leaps upon you and you tumble exactly like a dead stone to the bottom of the gorge. This is how I decided to give myself. To give myself right out of my hand . . . This was the plan; this was the will of the Father. By fulfilling it through obedience (the fulfilment itself was obedience), I have filled the world from heaven down to hell . . . Now I am all in all, and this is why the death which poured me out is victory. My descent, my vertiginous collapse, my going under (under myself) into everything that was foreign and contrary to God—down into the underworld: this was the ascent of this world into me, into God . . . You are in God—at the price of my own Godhead. You have love—I lost it to you . . . This was my victory. In the Cross was Easter. (Cited in Farwell 2005, 71).

Death has been a part of universal human experience since the first Adam, and hence death must be a part of the total solidarity with humanity by the second Adam. This is why Christians are able to speak of the Cross as an act of love. It is a radically self-giving commitment to remain in relationship with humanity, even to the extent of losing oneself totally. "Holy Saturday is the day in which God has died 'into' our very own death and sanctified it, in all its stark, immovable threat" (Farwell 2005, 69). But more than this, upon death Jesus the Divine-Human is entirely dependent upon God the Father for his Redemption. Jesus, by virtue of his human nature, has become powerless like us and this is the pathway forged for us through the valley of death—that we learnt to trust in that which is beyond our human limitation. Beyond human life, there is only the Eternal God, and any whom God so deigns to draw unto Godself, wrapping us up into God's own Eternal Being. What then, does Paul mean when he urges us to be dead with the dead God? "The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 5:12-6:11)

In the liminal moment, when we at last grasp our own finiteness, we are forced with this choice: do we continue to trust only in ourselves, to know only that which is available within our human limitations; or do we open ourselves to the possibility that we are not as superior in the universe as we have previously thought ourselves to be? The ego must accept that it is powerless to project far enough into the world to make sense of all of life. We must let go of the expectation that we are in complete control, that we are masters of our destiny, that we are autonomous beings who need no Other.

Jesus models this perfectly for us. As Incarnated Being he submitted himself entirely to Father not only in obedience, but in existential dependence. “Because the Descent is the final point reached by the Kenosis, and the Kenosis is the supreme expression of the inner-Trinitarian love, the Christ of Holy Saturday is the consummate icon of what God is like” (Nichols 1990, 8). We stay in the moment, and wait for God to intervene, just as Jesus did. All of which sheds a soft dawning light upon Jesus’ words, “For those who want to save their life will lose it. And those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:25-26).

PART FOUR: BEING DEAD WITH THE DEAD JESUS

“The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised . . . If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” (Luke 9:22-24).

In this final section, I seek to describe what living in liminality with Jesus might look like. The challenge of the Christian gospel is always to follow in the way of Jesus. In the liminal moments of life that is not easy for the old guidebooks are lost, misunderstood or seemingly irrelevant. This is the time to follow Jesus into the tomb. This action of passivity is essentially an act of trust: that it will be okay to rest because God the Majestic Transcendent Being will bring about a new day. We strive to be still, to be patient, to wait.

“If you want God, then you must be prepared to let go of all, absolutely all, substitute satisfactions, intellectual and emotional. You must recognise that God is so unlike whatever can be thought or picture, that, when you have got beyond the stage of self-indulgent religiosity there will be nothing you can securely know or feel. You face a blank: and any attempt to avoid that or shy away from it is a return to playing comfortable religious games. The dark night is God’s attack on religion. If you genuinely desire union with the unspeakable love of God, then you must be prepared to have your ‘religious’ world shattered.” (Williams 1994, 97).

1. Liminal Spirituality

In order to embrace the invitation to be ‘dead with the dead God’ we need to learn the art of ‘standing still’ through the storm. Contemplative Prayer and Spiritual Practices are essential training regimes that strengthen a person’s psycho-spiritual capacity to confront the silence without fear. Just as core muscle strength is key for the body to stand upright and strong, inner ‘centeredness’ is key for psycho-spiritual strength. In *Finding our Way Again*, Brian McLaren notes, “If you’ve lost your way to the desired destination you’re in shallow trouble. But if in the process you’ve also lost the address you were supposed to visit, your trouble just got deep. If you don’t realize you’ve forgotten what your

desired destination is, you're in the bottomless pit the great Dane, Soren Kierkegaard, called the deepest level of despair—namely, to be in a hopeless situation but not realize it or feel bad about it” (McLaren 2008, 67). The ancient spiritual practices function as rest stops and road signs along the way, so that we might keep walking, even though the immediate sense is one of being lost.

Those called to vocational priesthood have a particular role to give shape and space to the experience of liminal encounters with the Sacred, primarily through liturgical and sacramental leadership. However, a sacramental laity is even more important in liminal times. Sacramental actions, “or more particularly our missional deeds, actually confer grace. In fact, this could be the case even more so than the standard (somewhat abstracted) sacraments of the Christendom Church” (Frost 2004, 137). William Countryman describes this as a ‘universal priesthood’ in which every human being who has encountered the Sacred has a ministry to others as we traverse life together. “Re-understanding sacraments from a post-modern catholicity can help us to move away from numbering the ways in which God is at work . . . the sacraments as such are pointers towards the sacramentality of all things: specific places through which the presence of God which is everywhere is felt in a specific time and event” (Clark 2009, 111).

2. Liminal Liturgies

A rediscovery of the purpose and power of ritual in our gatherings is critical for growing through liminality together as Christ's Church. In current practice, transitional rituals frequently fall short of their capacity for transformation because the ritual allocates inadequate time and space for real engagement with ourselves and God. In traditional societies rites of passage frequently extend for days. Compare a traditional week long Indian Wedding Ceremony with a 40 minute church wedding plus 4 hour reception. Becoming open to the experience of the inbetween takes time. In the 1980s St. Philips Episcopal Church in Durham, New York recognised this issue and started work on a adolescent rite into adulthood, shaped by the Jewish bar/bat mitzvah tradition, that became known as Rite-13. This has become a popular tool used by a variety of denominations, as an integrated catechism process that takes place over two years, exploring four areas of Self, Spirituality, Sexuality and Society. The end is celebrated with a Rite-13 ritual involving the whole community.

Effective liminal rituals for our time are moving outside of the church walls and embracing artistic communication. ‘BEYOND’ are a creative arts collective co-ordinated by Martin Poole, an ordained Church of England Priest in Brighton, UK. BEYOND have pioneered liturgical art installations in public spaces, drawing participation primarily from the local community rather than the local church. The first of these was an ‘Easter path’ which consisted of a walk around the retail district with a meditation “guidemap” to “lenten installations” in shop windows. Thousands pilgrim to the Brighton Beach Boxes in Advent for the ‘Brighton Beach Box Advent Calendar’—40 beach box owners volunteer to create an art installation in their own box, or work with an artist to create one together, and then a new box is opened each day, as for a normal advent calendar. It culminates in a nativity celebration with

hundreds from the Brighton community dressing up to participate and welcome the birth of Christ. This is transformative liminal liturgy!

3. Liminality Church

The challenge of Holy Saturday liminality for the Christian Church undergoing massive socio-cultural transition is daunting. To those who were struggling with his teaching, Jesus once said, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:60). I believe this is the guidance the Western Church needs to respond to the opportunity implicit in its present liminality: to let the dead be dead, and get back to basics: to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbour as we love our self. "The kenosis of the gospel is that it does not seek to oust or master other narratives; its nature is love, not victory" (Clark 2009, 109).

In other words, the Christian expresses their faith in God by allowing the dead church to die. Scott Cowdell describes this as a pneumatology of hope, rather than despair. If we trust in the Church as Religious Institution, we are driven to despair, for movement out of liminality only comes from outside ourselves. In contrast, to embrace the Community of God as Mystical Union with Christ, is to let go of those human definitions of the Christian Church and reformulate our identity and understanding with more explicit reference to Divine Mystery (Cowdell 2006). Elsewhere he concludes that this leads the Church into a ministry of 'midwifery' rather than 'palliative care.' "That does not mean abandoning the old...[however] the ministry task today is not to preserve and protect dwelling pockets of the old, but to see where the new is coming to birth and put in our best efforts there" (Cowdell 2004, 70).

Brueggemann and Frost both employ the lessons of exile to the prophetic task of ministry and church today. In Brueggemann's words: "Prophetic ministry consists of offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God's freedom and his will for justice" (Brueggemann 2001, 116). This includes the formation of *communitas*, radical discipleship, and prophetic ministry that "seeks to penetrate the numbness in order to face the body of death in which we are caught...[at the same time as seeking to] . . . penetrate the despair that new futures can be believed in and embraced by us" (Brueggemann 2001, 17). The New Monastic communities within the Emerging Church movement are a particularly interesting expression of this.

Monastic movements were creations and movements of the Spirit. If new monasticism is to serve the mission of God through the Church, as I hope, then retrieval—reconnection to the ancient church, and renewal—the breaking in of God's future, his new creation, need to go hand in hand (Cray 2010, 10).

Conclusion

This essay has presented an argument that liminality is a natural part of human experience which presents the follower of Jesus with an opportunity. Surviving liminality requires faith and understanding—that this is not the end of the story, that there has been One who has been here

before. It is, in fact an opportunity to come into intimate contact with that One who is beyond our reach in the everyday of life. Saying yes to this opportunity means embracing the moment— standing still in the dark, or lying with Jesus in the grave. It is a strange mix however, for at once there is a letting go of the old, a refusal to draw on human resources, the determined act of trusting that there is a future—we embrace doing nothing! At the same time, we are busy with critical thinking and questioning which are the marks of liminal intelligence that refuses to believe there is nothing but void. That there is a power beyond the grave to come to our rescue, break through the meaninglessness with purpose and redeem the old ways so that they make sense again in a new light. Though the old has died, the new has not yet come.

What does it take
to mark the canvas
to write the line
to play the chord
to plough the field
to cross the river
to change the world?
Perhaps
the courage
to let become
what is waiting to become
(‘What does it take?’ in Adams 2010, 1)

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