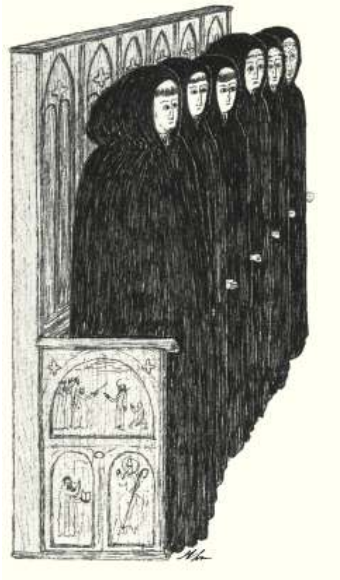
A Happy Easter

During the course of Holy Week, a group of people gathered from any part of the congregation who wishes to be there, will be meeting at 9.00pm in the evening for Compline, a late evening service in the Old Church. Although it is possible to use a modern language version of this service, we have normally kept to the traditional language which helps to create, in my imagination at least, the atmosphere of life in the monastery in the days of old.



During Compline, I think about the monks whose lives were riveted together with utterly predictable events. There was the regular worship, seven times a day, starting at 2am in the morning and ending at 5pm in the evening, with a daily mass in addition. This was interspersed with practical work, study, and a little recreation, followed by sleep. This pattern was repeated day after day, year after year, from the moment of entry to the moment of death. The only excitement or variety in this pattern to expect is that found in the natural world as they worked in the garden and also in their worship, reflecting as it did, the slow changes of the seasons of the Church's liturgical Calendar.

Decani, the south

Cantoris, the north

Standing on south and north sides of their chapels, they would recite the psalms to plainchant, now Cantoris singing, then Decanis, and singing the whole 150 psalms of David in one week, every week.

As the year went round, there were slight changes in the words to indicate the coming seasons, and then huge changes in the words for the actual major seasons of the year. For example, the rigours of the Advent season slowly start to soften 10 days before Christmas as O Sapientia, the first of the aniphons heralding the Nativity, is sung as part of the worship.

Similarly, as Lent proceeded with its long and heavy psalms and readings, the coming of Easter was seen in the Masses of Holy Week, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and the many practical preparations for the Paschal season such as cleaning, decorating the church and preparing the Paschal Candle for its moment of glory at the dawn procession.

During Compline there is one particular prayer which is particularly weighty and thought-provoking:

Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God,
who at this evening hour didst rest in the sepulchre,
and didst thereby sanctify the grave to be a bed of hope to thy people:
Make us so to abound in sorrow for our sins,
which were the cause of thy passion
that when our bodies lie in the dust,
our souls may live with thee;
who livest and reignest with the father and the Holy Ghost,
one God, world without end.
Amen

There doesn't seem to be any evidence as to who wrote this prayer and it may date originally to the days of St. Benedict in the 6th century. But there is something special about this prayer, especially when said on Good Friday night or at Easter Eve Compline. It has a grittiness and willingness to face up to deep reality about it. It confronts the pain of our death and places it squarely in the context of the death and burial of Christ, where it belongs. It uses a wonderful metaphor - the grave, sanctified as a bed of hope, - and as we go home to lie in our own warm and comfortable beds, we do so with those words clanging in our ears, reminding us both of our mortality and of our hope in the death of Jesus, raising us to new life, both in the here and now and also in heaven where we will live with Christ.

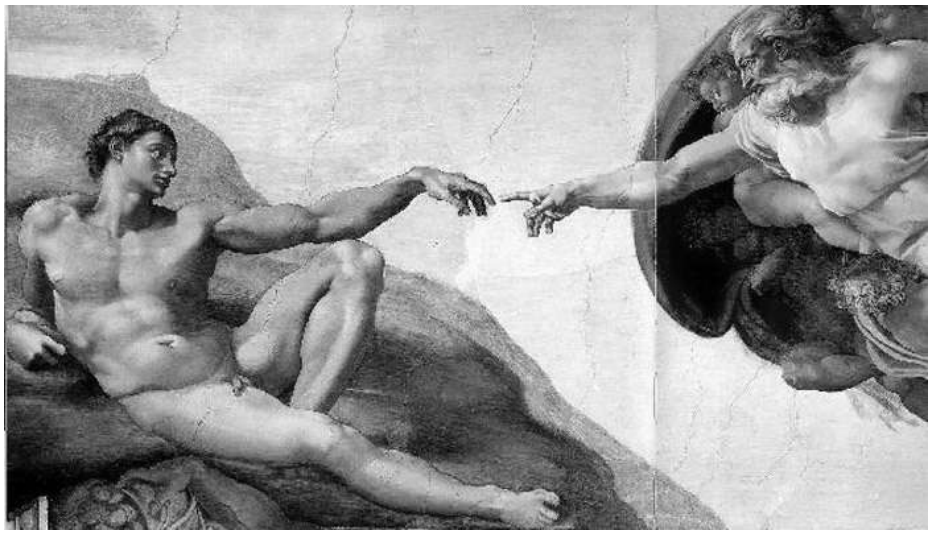
On Easter Day, we may feel able at last to pull away from these heavy and solemn thoughts and concentrate instead on the future which the resurrection of Christ gives us.

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ makes a new creation. That means that from now on, for us, everything good is possible and the past is seen in a new light. It is remembered and used to teach ourselves and guide our footsteps away from danger, but its sins may be forgiven, and certainly refused permission to dictate to us.

This happens - not because Jesus suffered more than anyone else, or that his life was altruistic through and through. In the Introduction to Canon Lucy Winkett's Lent Book, *Our Sound is Our Wound* (Continuum 2010) she writes:

> "There is a danger, as we contemplate the crucified Christ that excessive attention is focused on the wounds both of Christ and of subsequent martyrs, leaving Christians open to the charge of disproportionate morbidity." (page 6)

I agree with this sentiment strongly. Jesus makes a new creation not by the extreme nature of his suffering but because of who it is who is suffering. It is only because he is in human form the full expression of God's love, sacrificed, given up freely, offered once for all and truly covenanted to redeem humanity and reconcile us to our maker that he makes the crucial difference to our lives. We are now part of a new creation, just as potent and charged as the first creation, pictured below by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel.

So, what matters now is our response. Today, we experience the past as redeemed and the future beckons us with the promise of the fruits of love and faith. Resurrection means re-creation for the whole world, and starting with us, who know and share and celebrate its power. On Eater Day we celebrate the reality that our darkness is illuminated. Our lives are now charged with hope.

Christ the morning star is risen, never again to set, and is alive and reigns for ever and ever.