

DECEMBER 20

O CLAVIS DAVID

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*O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel
controlling at your will the gate of heaven:
come, break down the prison walls of death
for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death; and
lead your captive people into freedom.*

“Wise men at their end know dark is right.” From death, there is no escape, and the wiser of us, writes the poet Dylan Thomas, “do not go gentle into that good night... [but] rage, rage against the dying of the light.” Against the horizon of one’s finitude and the inevitability of the grave, it seems that one must “burn and rage at end of day.” After all, “a live dog is better than a dead lion” (Ecclesiastes 9:4).

At times, the Old Testament speaks peacefully of the grave. It is said of Abraham that he “died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life” (Genesis 25:8). Elsewhere, though, in the stoic lament of

Ecclesiastes and the passion of Psalms, we see death as the harrow it is. “The dead know nothing... [and] never more have any share in all that is done under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). And so we hear David ask rhetorically, and painfully, “Do you work wonders for the dead? Will the shades stand and praise you?” (Psalm 88:11).

In the mystery of the Incarnation, Jesus answers these words with a surprising “Yes!” Christ indeed does “not go gentle into that good night,” but his “burn and rage at end of day” is not the defiant hurrah! of the Greek hero. It is, rather, the harrowing of the death itself. “I died, and behold I am alive for evermore” (Revelation 1:18). Christ enters the door of the tomb that “through death he might render powerless him who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14).

In what Simon Tugwell calls “the omnipotent weakness of God,” Christ’s entry into “that good night” is victorious. It is the answer to the prayer heard in today’s antiphon: *veni, et educ vincitum de domo carceris, sedentem in tenebris. Come, and lead forth from his prison the captive who sits in the shadows.*

The reality of this finds expression in the words *O Clavis David* (O Key of David). King David is himself a type of Christ, and his kingdom a prefiguration of the heavenly one. To speak of Christ as the “Key of David” is to ascribe to Christ the prerogative of granting entry to the “kingdom of [his] Father” (Matthew 26:29; cf. Isaiah 22:22). And since it is sin and death which separates humanity from this kingdom, this title means to speak of Christ as the one who “[has] the keys to Death and Hades” (Revelation 1:18). It is he who “has the key of David” and “who opens and no one shall shut” (Revelation 3:7).

But what good is it to open the door of the tomb unless Jesus also says to us “Come out!” (Luke 11:43)? As God, Christ himself cannot remain in the grave, but us—“Who can deliver his [own] soul from the power of Sheol?” (Psalm 89:48). To be led forth from the prison, Christ, the Key of David, must open himself to us as well. And in the pierced side of Jesus on the Cross (cf. John 19:34), we see opened the One who said of himself, “I am the door; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture” (John 10:9).