



Dear Friends,

There is a story in the news at the moment that fills me with fear. It is not the sight of bombs dropping on Palm Sunday worshippers in Ukraine or patients evacuated from the last hospital in Northern Gaza sitting on their gurneys wondering what hope there is for their ongoing treatment or for their lives. Those images, although horrific and seemingly unending, also feel removed from life here in Australia.

No, the story that fills me with fear is what is happening in a country that, apparently, follows principles and laws like our own. It is the story of US President Trump using the wartime Alien Enemies Act to deport scores of people alleged to be gang members and sending them to a mega prison in El Salvador. This is the stuff of nightmares for me. That these deportations and incarcerations are taking place without due process and against, in some cases, the ruling of the courts. That these people are being taken to a prison system where Amnesty International says hundreds have died in state custody from causes including beatings, torture and a lack of medical care, where El Salvador's president Nayib Bukele admits that some of the 100,000 people who have ended up in his prisons are innocent but dismisses them as "collateral damage".

It occurred to me this morning that these images of men being stripped of their human dignity, frogmarched through this maximum-security prison, are what the cross and crucifixion represented in the Roman Empire. The cross was used to punish criminals and dissidents, but it was also used to strike fear into the hearts of subject populations, a reminder of the penalty for challenging Roman authority.

And yet the early Christian church refused to be cowed by the image of the cross. In fact, they claimed this image of death. They embraced it as a declaration of God's overcoming love, that God's love is greater than all the terrible things that human beings can do to each other.

Paul writes, *“For Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”* (1 Corinthians 1:22-25)

So, I am going to think of this image of US Government funded prisons differently. I am going to think of it as an image of what Christ endured for us. I am going to see in it God’s great overcoming of evil through Christ’s death and resurrection. And in doing this, I pray that I can defeat its power to intimidate me, to cause me to fear, to draw back, in any way, from a commitment to fairness, to truth, to justice and to compassion.

And along with it all the other images of death that are used in the same way, recognising that in Christ’s death, God’s love poured out for us, we have our antidote to the fear of death.

Below is a poem that sparked my reflection. It goes in a slightly different direction, but I share it with you as well.

May you have a good Good Friday and a good Easter Sunday. One that emboldens you with the goodness of God.

Belinda

Rebecca Elson

Antidotes to Fear of Death

*Sometimes as an antidote
To fear of death,
I eat the stars.*

*Those nights, lying on my back,
I suck them from the quenching dark
Til they are all, all inside me,
Pepper hot and sharp.*

*Sometimes, instead, I stir myself
Into a universe still young,
Still warm as blood:*

*No outer space, just space,
The light of all the not yet stars
Drifting like a bright mist,
And all of us, and everything
Already there
But unconstrained by form.*

*And sometime it's enough
To lie down here on earth
Beside our long ancestral bones:*

*To walk across the cobble fields
Of our discarded skulls,
Each like a treasure, like a chrysalis,
Thinking: whatever left these husks
Flew off on bright wings.*

"Antidotes to Fear of Death" appears in Rebecca Elson's posthumously published poetry collection *Responsibility to Awe*. Elson was a Canadian-American astronomer and writer who died in 1999.