

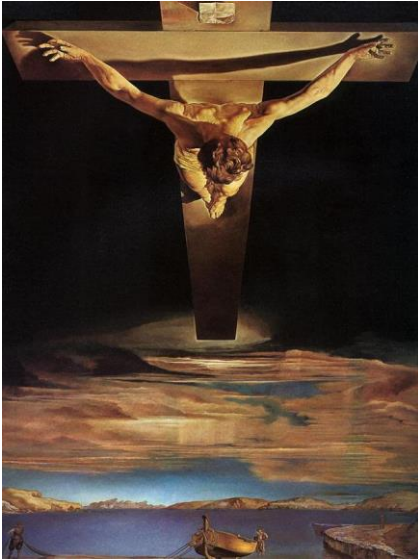
“AT THE CROSS” ~ part 3

Psalm 22:1-19; Mark 15:21-39

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Luke and John relate other words of Jesus from the cross,



but Mark (and Matthew as well) only tell us this one thing: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” I guess we can see why they don’t bother to include any other words. What else can compare to this?

As Jerry pointed out last week, the theological perspective here is rather different from Luke’s, which insists that there is no place, not even a place of suffering and despair, where God is not near. Mark is acknowledging the reality of a darker experience, and locating Jesus within that reality.

Now, theologically and on the basis of much of the rest of our scriptures, from Genesis through the Psalms and the prophets and the testimony of the early church to the vision of Revelation, we may be prepared to agree with Luke. God is everywhere. We cannot hide from God. God doesn’t abandon God’s people. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. God is never truly absent, even when we can’t feel or see God’s presence.

But (as Richard Foster puts it) those “theological niceties are of little help to us when we enter the Sahara of the heart.” Sometimes only the absence seems real. Reassurances don’t help. It’s not hard to relate to Jesus’ words.



It is not hard to hear, feel, the very human anguish in the words. “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” It’s interesting that we get to hear Jesus’ cry out in Aramaic, which would have been his native tongue, as if Mark (who otherwise wrote his gospel in Greek) wants to emphasize that these are truly the words of Jesus, so we understand how deeply Jesus has shared our sense of separation from God.

Even if we might not compare our own experience to Jesus’ suffering, many people – perhaps most of us – go through something like this, some time or other. St. John of the Cross called it “the dark night of the soul.” Someone else referred to “the cloud of unknowing.” An old spiritual says, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.”

Cheerful, upbeat versions of Christianity steer clear of such talk. *Lots* of people prefer to believe in the power of positive thinking, the rewards of doing good, and a doting-parent God who is responsive to all politely phrased requests. But we know that to live as human beings in this world is to live with uncertainty, to witness terrible things, to face darkness and loneliness, and to sometimes have the bottom fall out from under us. To ask, “where is God?”



Sometimes grief and loss precipitate that sense of abandonment; it might come from an experience of betrayal or trauma or suffering. It can go along with depression. But it also might occur for no particular reason that you can name. It doesn’t necessarily (or even often) mean that God is angry or that you’re doing something wrong or that something is wrong with you. Maybe, eventually, when that season of silence comes to an end, there may be understanding. Or there may not.

Richard Foster suggests that such times make clear to us that God is God, not at our beck and call. He thinks that they may, among other things, teach us to be less dependent for our faith on what we might call “evidence” or “results” – success in our work or relationships or ministry, even spiritual progress or feelings of blessedness. Can we wait and believe that God is still God when none of that is evident? A dark

night of the soul may be an invitation to radical trust in a God whose purposes we can't fathom. Does that make it any better? I don't know, but it does give us a way to *be* in the midst of it. It suggests, perhaps, that the thing to do is to keep on crying out to the God whose presence we don't feel... like Jesus, and like the writer of the Psalm he quotes.

Jesus was not the first person to know what it was to be forsaken. He knows this, because he knows these words that come from Psalm 22, from his ancestors who also knew what it was to feel that God had turned away from them.



Like the Psalmist, Jesus cries out his abandonment. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Platitudes will not do - only this cry from the heart, from the depths of despair. It may be that in quoting the start of this Psalm, Jesus is referencing the rest of the Psalm as well, the way the Psalmist voices his pain, frustration, doubt and anger to God. Psalm 22 is a remarkable meditation on suffering. The writer seems to be having an extended argument with himself – or with God – going back and forth between the theological conviction of God's faithfulness and his own present experience of forsakenness, struggling between trust and doubt. It's honest, wrenching, and thorough. But the cry still begins with “My God, my God.” This is radical faith, this determination to get through to the absent God, the conviction, perhaps, that in the end there's nowhere else to go.

It makes our usual vision of faith and discipleship seem feeble by comparison.

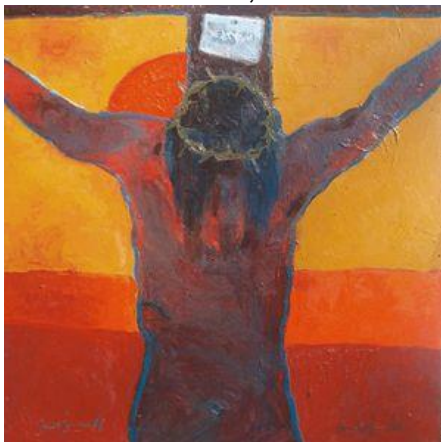
The suffering and abandonment Jesus voices and the Psalm he quotes both demand that we acknowledge the experience of forsakenness. Some of us know about it only too well and too personally.



But beyond our own experience, there are many around us, in our society and in our world, who feel themselves abandoned, who wonder where God is and why God (and everyone else) has forgotten them: people in prisons, in refugee camps, in hopeless poverty, in constant fear. We'd rather turn away from that kind of suffering. But the cross makes it hard to turn away. The cross demands that we see suffering, stay with it, reflect on what it is to feel the absence of God. See it in Jesus, see it in yourself, see it in your friend, your neighbor, your enemy. Like Jesus, like the Psalmist, cry out to God about it.



Understand that the cross breaks down all efforts at denial, or compromise, or superficial and nice religion. The cross makes the truth of the world's brokenness and alienation undeniable. The cross calls forth this loud cry on behalf of all the abandoned. And the cross shows us the weakness that will break power, the holiness that will defeat evil, the truth that will overcome lies, the love that will defeat hate ... the God who calls us to radical trust, and then demonstrates what that looks like.



If you read on to the end of Psalm 22, you will find that it eventually moves to praise. But not too quickly. And neither should we. We'll get there by Easter, but there's a long story of darkness and forsakenness between here and there. It's Jesus' story. It's our story. It's the world's story.

If you read on to the end of Mark, you will find that the women come to the tomb in darkness,



and their first reaction at the news of Easter is amazement and *terror*. No wonder. As Mark understands it, you can't get straight to Easter from Palm Sunday without going through the darkness and despair of the cross. And you can neither predict or control where the story goes next, because you are not in charge. This is not a tidy and cozy religion we've been called to, but a path of discipleship that goes through *both* joy and darkness... with Jesus who has been here before us.

Amen.

Resources:

Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*

Walter Bruggemann, *Into Your Hand: Confronting Good Friday*