

Good Friday Meditation

The Fourth Word:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Matthew 27:46 - About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?"

Luke 3:15-23 (Today's New International Version)

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 16 John answered them all, "I baptize you with ^[a] water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with ^[b] the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

19 But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, 20 Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

21 When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened 22 and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Luke's narrative continues, of course, by laying out Jesus's earthly genealogy as the son of Joseph, the son of Heli, the son of Levi, etcetera, right back to Adam, first earthly image of God. It is the documentation of God's incarnation, Jesus, the divine inheritor of our fallen human condition, that ends on the cross. And nowhere but in the verse from Matthew is Christ more physical, more human.

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

These are words cried out in excruciating pain, the words of the tortured when all hope of good is drained from the world. The voice of agony and outrage: *why have you forsaken me?* On face value, these are NOT the words we want to hear from the Messiah, our Saviour. These words reverberate with the *why* raised by all who suffer, and perhaps especially with nonbelievers, the Richard Dawkinses of the world. If there is a God, why does he allow – in this case, exact – such suffering?

The agony of these words encapsulates and elevates Job's complaints, for instance; in fact, they provide a certain vindication for all of us who have ever suffered, and all who have doubts. Not that they trivialize Job's complaints, or ours – but rather, they hold up Job's outrage, our outrage, to God.

Forsaken. What does it mean to be forsaken? We have all felt that way at times with varying degrees of legitimacy, but to me the most painful example of someone being forsaken is what Matthew's gospel presents quite literally here: a man, a son, a child "forsaken" (apparently) by his father, his parent. A situation prefigured, perhaps, by Abraham's intended sacrifice of his son Isaac in Chapter Two of the Book of Genesis, but completed here in the sacrifice of God's son required by God himself. The child forsaken, cut off, abandoned by the parent –

an outrageous situation from our *Today's Parent* standards about loving and responsible parenthood. The most extreme form of Tough Love. A situation tragically common, though, among the youth, for example, that St. Paul's Home seeks to serve. A generation with the same basic form of genealogy as Christ, the physical Christ. The homeless, the forsaken among those who are already most vulnerable, children.

It always comes back to the question *Why?* Why is there this disconnect, this schism between parents and their children; how can it happen in the natural "order" of things? This disconnect that we find so difficult to comprehend at times – perhaps because we on the outside only see part of the picture. What about parents forsaken by their children, children whose choices lead them to dark, dark places?

Forsakenness. Suffering. Christ's excruciating cry is the cry of all humanity, humanity that suffers at its own hands – as Christ most certainly did – and at the hands of "nature." But where is God in this situation? And if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving and all-merciful, why does such bottomless suffering continue from generation to generation? It's the essence of the argument posed by nonbelievers, encapsulated in this severed moment of despair, a moment that apparently has no relationship, no connection, with the past – the witness and example of God's mercy beforehand – and with no faith in the promise of God's mercy to come.

It is all about the severing of a relationship, a three-part relationship between the past, the present and temporary moment of fleshly agony, and the future. On literal and figurative levels it is about the relationship between God the Son and God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, the giver of life. The triune God to whom we appeal from the various levels of our humbled and elevated humanity.

These words, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* are extremely troubling – for the enormity of the suffering they express, and because they are NOT, on face value, what we expect or want or "need" to hear from our Saviour, our Redeemer. These words rattle my idea of the Blessed, Holy Trinity as a unified front, the concept of God as a benign, passive, uninvolved entity that may be the least challenging, the easiest, to accept. For, *if* we look at this moment when Christ is most human, most vulnerable, cut off from his heavenly father and his earthly mother – the cross itself not a symbol here of connection between earth and heaven, but (temporarily) one of the disconnection between the two – we see a terrifying schism, a breaking of what we understand as the promise of life. The disappearance, the abdication of the Holy Spirit? The death of good in the world.

BUT, as we know, the narrative and time itself are a continuum, interwoven aspects of Providence . And St. Luke reminds us of the peaceful, conciliatory presence of the giver of life, the Holy Spirit, even as we anticipate John the Baptist's murder at the hands of Herod. In the event of Christ's own baptism, following on the descent of the Holy Spirit as a dove, are the words of boundless love of the Father for the Son. *Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.* This is not the voice of a parent who forsakes his or her beloved child. So who and where is the God that "forsakes" the suffering Christ?

Note, however, that Christ's question is not *Where are you?* although the Dawkinses of the world might answer with grim delight: *Nowhere*, and that Christ is crying out to *no one*. Much more to the point, Christ's question is *Why?* which fully acknowledges that God exists, but appears to have (temporarily) turned his back.

Isn't this the question we ask all the time in the face of suffering large and small? Suffering that crosses cultural, economic and geographical borders. Nowhere do we the fallen more completely side with Christ than when he asks this question; nowhere is the image of suffering — of Christ as the forsaken child — more universal. Whether the forsaken one is a homeless, drug-addicted child on Barrington Street, or an orphan in Iraq or the Sudan or Afghanistan.

Conversely, the doubtful — the limited but honest? — would also ask, what kind of Father, what kind of parent, would demand such a sacrifice, such a price; demand and exact it? The life of a beloved child. The frightening, vindictive version of Jehovah? *Tough* love.

The only possible answer lies in the mystery of the Trinity. Nowhere do we so completely identify with Christ than in this disconnected moment when all we see is his pain and his humility: God emptied of God, God emptied of Self. God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made: God laid bare for us in selflessness. The Servant King.

But the Trinity is not complete without the dove, the Holy Spirit, the giver of life who proceeds from the Father: the Counselor. And how does the Holy Spirit work but through us and in us? In Christ's brokenness we identify ourselves; we are in a way vindicated, our sufferings absorbed into his. But we are implicated, too.

So as God in Christ is our example, what do we do with the meaning, the horrific reality, of his suffering, his forsakenness? If we identify with it, what then?

And what do we do, if we too have felt forsaken, and if, through our unity in Christ, the forsaken is one of us? If that forsaken child in Halifax or that forsaken child's forsaken parent is one of us, figuratively or literally? The same with the orphan in a war-torn country. Isn't Christ's plea for all the forsaken to be lifted up, both freed from present suffering and reconciled to the past, as well as given the promise and the hope of a future?

Why have you forsaken me? These are words we absolutely NEED to hear, to be reminded of our bond with him, and by extension, our bond with all who suffer. So in the end our questions and doubts don't really matter, as much as our recognition of reality, and our plea for help in helping — our invitation: Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Amen.