

Good Friday Meditation – Nathan Little **My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?**

“And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ (which means ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’)” Mark 15:34 NIV

Something is different here – you may have caught it already. Something sets these words apart from the others and makes them stand out in ways that will only become increasingly clear as we hear the rest of Jesus’ words from the cross read today and observe the relationship between them. We note that this cry of abandonment or dereliction (as it is commonly known) comes to us first in the original language that Jesus would have used. This puts these words in a very small category of Jesus’ sayings and certainly makes them different from the other six from the cross. These words are also words from a Psalm - the first verse of Psalm 22 – Jesus’ only “borrowed” words from the cross that point us back to the Old Testament to clarify this moment.

But these are not the differences I am talking about. These words, taken as they are in Mark and Matthew, convey a different attitude in Jesus. We see none of the trust of “into your hands I commit my Spirit” and none of the confidence of “It is finished”. Instead, we are given an image of uncomfortable loneliness and questioning. The relational address of God as “Father” is noticeably missing and the question “why?” sounds strange coming from the lips of one who has only expressed trust. Of course this difference can and has been eased with deeper exploration of Psalm 22. After all, according to the Gospel record, Jesus quotes only the first words of the Psalm. Many have argued – for good reason – that by quoting the first verse of the Psalm He intended to invoke its meaning in entirety. We would see why this is significant if we were to read Psalm 22. Its ending imagery is trusting and confident – far from the introduction we are given here in the Gospels. And yes, that would help reconcile this difference and give today’s words a more coherent and smooth narrative, and there is a space for that. But, for the moment, I would like to leave the tension and explore what Matthew and Mark were doing.

Matthew and Mark are the only Gospels where this utterance is found and in these Gospels these are the only words recorded from Jesus on the cross. Perhaps it is because this statement does not fit in the other narratives – the more polite accounts of the crucifixion. Luke and John are theologically structured to offer a picture of a more confident and a more trusting Jesus. In film, in story, and especially in the biblical narratives, first words and only words are important. Since these are both the first and only words from Jesus on the cross in Matthew and Mark, it should cause us to pay close attention.

Matthew, in his Gospel, is concerned with showing Jesus as the fulfillment of OT prophecy: the Messiah. It is this fourth utterance of Jesus which aligns His experience with the Psalms’ portrayal of a suffering righteous one. And so its lonely inclusion continues Matthew’s case of demonstrating Jesus as the promised one. Mark, however, gives us these words to show us the severity of our sin, our human predicament, and how God, in Jesus, was one of us as He cried, suffered, and bore our human distance and questions. I would like to focus on this account. Mark is taking us on a journey to show the abandonment that Jesus experienced – one of the reasons why I think we have permission to read these words as they come to us. The growing context of abandonment that we have been introduced to reaches a climax in Jesus’ words. The disciples sleep, then abandon Him. Peter denies Him. The crowd withdraws from him - and continues to mock from under the cross - and His clothing is taken. Even the thieves on either side of Jesus in Mark’s account, are simply recorded as mocking Him. (Again, because

of Mark's focus and context, we are missing the hopeful dialogue between Jesus and the thief that Luke includes). And at the moment of death Mark reveals what he has been pointing us to understand: complete abandonment – expressed through a Psalm.

But here is why that is important. In that obedient journey and in that abandonment we can best understand the extent to which Jesus entered our story. The solidarity and the unity of Jesus with us is displayed in the use of these borrowed words. We see the extent to which He entered and assumed our human condition (only without sin) as we perceive the suffering that climaxes in His cry. In these words we see ourselves, or we should see ourselves because in the narrative of Scripture these are our lines – humanity's lines. It is only our human condition, birthed in Adam and confirmed in every life since the garden, that gives the right context to speak them. This is supposed to be our role. But someone else has just recited our part and has spoken as us for us. In being abandoned, Jesus attains human suffering and death and makes them His own.

How different the words of Psalm 22 sound coming from Jesus! In comparison to how the Psalm was first written and heard to when Jesus now utters them, what new meaning these words reveal, especially amongst the others! As Jesus speaks "my God, my God", He should say "my Father, my Father" and the fact that he does not – like in the other utterances - shows the extent to which He has assumed our fallen nature (sin excepting). His cry exposes just how far His obedience has taken Him. I think this is where Mark is leading us. And what we see is that Jesus cries for us in ways we cannot. It gives us space to explore the effect of abandonment from the perspective of one who has lived in perfect relationship with the Father and has known the Trinitarian sharing of life and love that we are being called into – a fullness of context that is foreign to us but one that informs this cry. Our expression of this cry is weakened by a blindness or a numbness that comes from being situated so deeply in the human situation. No, we have a hard time fully understanding the pain in these words because our humanity is too familiar with distance from God. Jesus, who is coming from a place of perfect unity and life and love of God, only truly knows the abandonment of distance – and in His experience of that distance we have the proper space to recognize the effect of our own sin. We must consider that the moment that brings the deepest words of agony from Christ on the cross is a condition that is native to fallen man. Outside of Christ, we too are Fatherless and in a condition worthy of this cry of separation. This is our cry apart from Jesus.

That is the significant part. God, in Jesus, fully enters the human story. These words are different because they are our words. As Jesus speaks them, we see the contours of God's response to our suffering, our questions, our condition, and the "Whys" that have no answer. I thought that this week again as I saw the images from the news and the whisper of, "My God... My God" escapes under my breath. It feels like I say this far too often alongside the rest of humanity at the extent of evil and depth of suffering that I see. And we want a response and an answer. But no, in the case of Jesus an answer is not given – or an explanation (not here, not yet). Jesus' words receive nothing, no saving, no ending of the suffering – just a withdrawal, a veiling, a darkness, and a silence. But there is an ownership now as these words, this forsaken condition belonging to us, is brought into contact with the Trinitarian work of renewal and restoration. And so these are words for us at times like these. Times when the whys and the distance from God seem to outweigh the words of confidence or assurance. Like Jesus' cry, these may not be words that receive an answer, but words that are given a new context. We question in someone who has questioned for us and to a God who has endured the cross to claim ownership for all the suffering and abandonment that we experience.

While it is important that we take the time to enter into His cry – what is MOST important is to remember that Jesus first entered into this cry; our cry. Christ has cried our abandonment. We who deserve to suffer God-forsakenness can be assured in this moment and with these words that God has taken responsibility for us and for our sin.