

MY GOD WHY?

Matthew 27:46
Rev. Leo Douma, 9th March 2008

One of the biggest fears of any human being is being abandoned by those we love, being left alone. In our crowded cities of millions, loneliness is what many struggle with. Many look so successful but feel lost inside. An English doctor once conducted an experiment to study the effects of isolation on people. He built a sound proof room 3x3 meters and suspended it by nylon ropes. Each participant wore padded fur gloves and heavy woollen socks to eliminate the sensations of touch. Special translucent glasses limited their vision. After just 1 hour of isolation, some people found it impossible to concentrate. This was followed by feelings of anxiety and panic. Many just could not stay in that room for more than five hours. We human beings are social creatures, just like God who is a social being, three in one. We were never meant to be alone. We do not cope with being abandoned, being isolated. That's why solitary confinement is so tough for prisoners. It's why children are petrified if they feel lost or abandoned by their parents. It's why we find divorce, death, migration, all forms of separation, so tough. We need people to share our stuff with. But however we feel about being left alone, no one, but no one has felt the loneliness that Jesus did on the cross, especially when he cried out "*My God, my God why have you forsaken me.*" The key word here in this saying is 'forsaken'; which literally means to be abandoned, left alone, or deserted.

This fourth saying of Jesus on the cross is actually a quote from the opening words of Psalm 22. These words of Jesus from the cross were of such significance that God saw fit to tell about them-word for word-by way of prophecy. The Psalm is clearly about the

complaint David makes when he felt totally abandoned by God at an hour of desperate need "...*why have you forsaken my, why are you so far from saving me. Oh my God I cry out by day, but you do not answer...do not be far from me, for trouble is near, and there is no one to help...many bulls have surrounded me...but you, O Lord, be not far off*". This is the language of complaint, desperate grievance, protest; objection. This is not like the previous words of Jesus on the cross. This time it's not a prayer of forgiveness or kind words to a thief or his mother.

This time it's a scream. It is a cry of anguish. It is a complaint, a demand directed at God. This complaint came at the end of a long dark silence. We might think that the crucifixion lasted about an hour- but it took a large part of the day. Jesus' hands and feet were nailed and tied to the cross at about 9am. At midday everything went black. It was completely dark and silent for three hours. All those hurling abuse were scared into silence. You couldn't see anything and no one said anything. In the utter silence all you could hear was the struggled breathing of the three crucified men as they slowly suffocated to death. And then at the ninth hour, at 3pm, the silence is broken by a horrible sound as Jesus screams out, almost roars! It is a deep cry of anguish. It's a bitter complaint directed at God. There was violence in Jesus' voice. He exerted himself to raise his voice.

Our text says "*Jesus cried out with a loud voice*". In Psalm 22:1 the word translated 'groaning' can also mean to 'roar'. The power Christ put into this complaint is a bitter lesson for us. It suggests to us that we can never understand how deep Jesus sank or how he suffered in those three hours of darkness. But the immensity is sensed when, at the end of it, Jesus reaches his lowest point and he "*cries out*" with this "*loud voice*". He roars out, he screams his

complaint at God. It is a voice with much suffering and pain in it. There is an agonizing demand in it. Never has the world heard such dreadful words as these that exploded from the pit of hell and tore at the gate of heaven: *"Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani- my God my God why have you forsaken me?"*

Perhaps some one might feel that these words are not so significant. There has been so much suffering in the world and there still is. Much of the suffering appears much worse than one man's suffering on the cross. The Romans put thousands to death by crucifixion. And millions have been tortured and executed over the centuries. Even with ourselves, we have had those very difficult times when we felt forsaken by God, abandoned by God and left in the lurch. There have been times when some of us may have raised the fist in the air and yelled "God, why". But we cannot compare those experiences with that of Jesus here in our text. For, usually, when we have come through our suffering, we begin to realise a few things. Firstly, although we may have appeared to have been forsaken by God, in reality he never let go. Like in the poem "Footprints in the sand".

We look back and see two sets of prints in the sand. But during our most difficult time we see one pair of foot prints instead of two and assume God left us for a while, that he abandoned us when we needed him most. And we ask 'why God, why leave us when it was tough?' But in fact during the hard time God was carrying us. God in his love may put us through hard times for our good, for our spiritual growth, to bring us closer to him. It may not feel that way in the middle of our suffering- but later we see and feel God's grace as we cling to him. God needs to do this to us from time to time. For the reality is that often we forsake him!

Far too often we abandon God and forget him. Sometimes in our actions and thoughts we outright deny him! And God says 'My child, why have you forsaken me? Why have you left me out of your life? Why do you forget me so often or push me out?' Then God has used that harsh experience to bring us back to his loving arms.

But this was not the case with Jesus. Christ did not just feel rejected. He was rejected. Jesus was not going through a psychological experience; he was utterly abandoned. Let's get it clear. Jesus was completely and totally rejected by God. God had turned his back on his son and abandoned him. God was not just teaching Jesus a lesson; 'this is for your own good'.

Christ was bearing the full brunt, the entire force of God's anger and justice. To quote the famous sermon of Jonathan Edwards, Christ was "a sinner in the hands of an angry God". There were no loving arms for Jesus to reach out to. Imagine the pain for him. Jesus had never known a time, even before the universe was created that as God's Son he was not his Father's delight. Their fellowship had never been broken. The unity of the trinity is an intimacy beyond human understanding. So often in his earthly ministry Jesus would be in prayer, speaking for long times with his father. But now, this is not the act of fatherly love, but of anger and hatred. Yes hatred! For God hates sin and evil. He loathes it. For sin opposes and rebels against everything God stands for. And Jesus had become that sin. He had identified himself with the human race, its sin and its evil. He stood in our place.

As 2 Corinthians 5:21 puts it: "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us*". All the sin of humanity was gathered in a pile, so to speak, and heaped on Jesus. Jesus had never forsaken God as we do. He had never sinned as we always do. He had always been

completely obedient and loving to his father. Yet Christ is regarded as 'the sinner'. All the lusting, all the idolatry, all the materialism, all the hatred, envying, murder, racism, every sinful thought- all of it was placed on Jesus. And so the full heat and ferocity of God's anger was poured out on him. God completely removed his own presence. Just when his Son needed him the most, God abandoned him. He withdrew all his grace and care. Even his common grace, the mercy God has for his enemies, the grace that gives sunshine and rain even to the evil ones, even that God removed from his son.

So completely does God withdraw his presence and grace that even the light of the sun is gone! Christ and all the sin he bears is too repulsive to look at. He is too much of a shame and disgrace that even creation reacts against him. In a sense creation abandons and walks away from its creator. Jesus is all alone. He is hung on a cross. He is cursed. Being on the cross he is neither on earth nor in heaven. It is symbolic of one cursed. Earth does not want him. Heaven does not want him. There were no angels to support him. Neither was the Holy Spirit there to give consolation in his heart. Jesus was absolutely on his own, suffering all the torment of hell. For that, ultimately, is what hell is- where God's presence and grace are completely removed. Satan and all his forces were completely let loose on Christ. As David prophetically described it in Psalm 22: *"...dogs have surrounded me...rescue me from the mouth of the lions...from the horns of the bulls."* Jesus is rejected by everybody and everything. Again Psalm 22 says: *"I am a worm and not a man, scorned by man and despised by the people. All who see me mock me, they hurl their insults..."* But the thing that hurts the most is that Jesus knows his Father is behind this rejection.

In fact God supervises it. God in his justice sees that sin is paid for. The full penalty must be borne; for God is a holy God and a holy

God cannot tolerate sin, even if that sin is laid on his own Son. You see God, by his very nature cannot be in the presence of sin. It's been that way from the beginning when Adam & Eve sinned. God cannot accept sin for sin is rebellion against God. It is a denial of who God is. If we understand that our sins separate us from God, that it goes against the very fibre of his being, his justice, his wrath, and we multiple that by billions of billions times, we start to get the feel of what Jesus had to suffer. God himself supervised the punishment on Jesus because he bore the world's sin. Therefore Jesus' complaint was directed at God "...God...*why have you forsaken me?*"

Maybe we wonder; how can he ask "*Why...*"? After all, Jesus knew better than anyone why he had to suffer and be rejected. He had been determined to save his people. As the gospels tell us he had "*...turned his face toward Jerusalem...and knew his time had come.*" But it is one thing to know, it's another to do it. On the cross Jesus had to live through the answer for 'why'? There he discovered the full implications, the full breadth and depth of the punishment for sin in his human nature. In that immense suffering he wondered when he would reach the limit: 'was there no end?'

At the unbearable peak of his suffering Jesus discovered the ultimate nature of hell; the complete rejection and abandonment by God; being utterly separated from God forever. And that is what ripped at his very core. When we hear these terrifying words, let us remember that we were the cause of his complaint. It was our sin that caused him to scream out those words, ours, and that of the rest of the world. We should have been the ones to suffer, not he, let's be honest. There is so much shame here.

And yet, yet, at the same time grace! There are in these awful words of Jesus cause for hope and praise. Did you notice them? These words of Jesus do not only make clear the extent of our sin and the punishment we deserve. The words also show us God's answer for our salvation. Listen to them again, carefully: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Christ was completely forsaken by God his father. But Jesus never forsook his God and Father- not even in hell itself. Even from the pit, in the midst of total evil, rejected by God, Jesus still reached up and called for God! My God! The suffering his father caused him is almost beyond him. But Jesus does not rebel or curse or turn against God. He still calls out "*My God, my God...*" In the midst of complete evil and total rebellion Jesus is still obedient!

The first Adam could not obey God in a perfect world. Yet, Jesus, as the second Adam, obeyed and yearned for his God in hell itself. Do you know what that means? It means that Jesus has destroyed the grip of sin. He has paid its price. It means he has conquered. Jesus has won. There is the answer to our sin and shame, our loneliness and despair. "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"

In these words we perceive the awful ramifications of our sin. But in these words we also hear the first signs of victory, from the pit of hell itself. A theologian once described the trinity as God embracing. Now if a couple are embracing each other, how do they make space to include another person. They need to break the embrace, make space and then embrace again with the new person. On the cross as Jesus was forsaken, in a sense, beyond our ken, the Trinity's embrace was broken, the Son was abandoned to make space to embrace those who repent and believe into the family. And that embrace by God is so powerful, that, as Paul writes in Romans 8 "*nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ*

Jesus." If Jesus still hung on to God even in hell itself, then we see a love so powerful we know he will never let go of his embrace of us.

Never will he abandon us. Now it will not always feel that way. In fact even in our own congregation there are too many who feel alone, lonely, battling on their own. In faith they know Jesus loves them and will never let go. But we need to feel that truth from the body of Christ as well in our daily lives.

Remember, we the church are the voice of Jesus to express his love, we are his hands to provide his care. If we don't speak and act in Jesus' name, as substitutes for the substitute, then there will be those who do not hear Jesus. Loneliness is exacerbated in our congregation by our geographical spread, lots of new people who have given up family and friends networks in migrating to Australia, not to mention incredible work hours. Let's think of each other, give a call or email to say: we are thinking of you; drop by for a coffee, invite some one new for a BBQ. Jesus will never forsake us as he was forsaken. But for us to feel it, we need to be his servants caring for each other.