

A Reflection for Good Friday 2020

by Rev. Andrew Murphy

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

Both Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus uttered these words from the cross at the very height of his agony, at his most exhausted, at this point closest to death, when he'd endured all that the worst of our human nature could throw at him.

He'd been betrayed by a friend, abandoned by others, manhandled, beaten, falsely accused, unfairly tried, brutally flogged, stripped naked, humiliated, tortured in agony on the cross, mocked, laughed at, and left to hang and die without a hope in the world. Through all of that, it would've been remarkable if he'd felt that God *was* with him.

There's no shame in this. Jesus experienced the mental and spiritual anguish that we would surely expect him to feel. Depressed, battered and bruised, physically and mentally exhausted, life slipping away. It's natural that these words should come to his lips.

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

And it's all the more natural for Jesus, because, as faithful Jewish man, Jesus was intimately connected with these words from being a young boy. Because those words are actually the opening words of Psalm 22.

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

Yes, I fully believe that at that moment, Jesus *felt* abandoned by God. I fully believe that, there on the cross in utter exhaustion and agony, Jesus *was* at the very lowest point of human experience. He'd fallen to the bottom of the pit and taken all he could take. He identifies with all who feel that way. And there will be many people who can relate to how Jesus felt.

Those *feelings* need to be taken very seriously. But feelings don't always tell the full story.

Think of it like this: at his lowest point, at this pivotal and sacred moment when life is engulfed in death, Jesus was reaching for the words of the sacred Psalms of Israel – the prayers and worship songs he had grown up with.

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

Some of our Christian thinking about this passage over the years has been less than helpful. We've made up things about God the Father "turning his face away" from Jesus the Son, because he could not bear to look at all that sin. Well, I'm sure God must have wept with anguish at the suffering of his son, but God has to look upon human sins and failings and suffering all the time. I don't believe God ever turns his face away.

Instead, the clue surely lies in the psalm Jesus was quoting. Maybe find Psalm 22 in your Bible and read it for yourself. It begins with exactly what Jesus was feeling at that moment: abandoned, depressed, exhausted, ignored... but the psalm keeps moving

between human experience, human feelings, and the truth of *God's faithfulness, God's salvation, God's love*. It tells of all the pain we endure, then says: *Yet you are holy, yet you are trustworthy... Yet you are the one who brought me safely into this world...* This psalm, written hundreds of years before Jesus, could have been written for him on the cross, expressing his desperate agony. And yet, by verse 21, the tone changes, and the psalm becomes not a song of desolation, but a song of praise.

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

As Jesus uttered those opening words on the cross, the rest of the psalm would surely follow in his mind.

All the ends of the earth shall remember

and turn to the LORD;

and all the families of the nations

shall worship before him.

²⁸ *For dominion belongs to the LORD,*

and he rules over the nations.

²⁹ *To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;*

before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,

and I shall live for him.

³⁰ *Posterity will serve him;*

future generations will be told about the Lord,

³¹ *and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,*

*saying that **he has done it**.*

Or perhaps, it could be translated: ***It is finished!***

I'm sure that Jesus truly *felt* as though God had forsaken him. But his faith went deeper than his feelings. The God of Israel, the God of Love, most certainly **had never left him, and never would**.

We are never alone. Sometimes, in the depths of despair, perhaps it is that God is so *close to us*, so close that we can't even feel those loving arms around us, holding us tightly. It is also in those moments that we find ourselves closest to Jesus and all that he went through. Where feelings let us down, and our human strength fails, faith invites us to *trust completely* in the one who is holding us. The one who loves us.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus does just this. He says: *Into your hand I commit my spirit;*

There he's quoting Psalm 31, verse 5:

Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.

God of never-failing love,

In our pain, in our depression or anxiety, in our anguish or grief, when we feel that you are not there... in our journeys to the depths of suffering and despair, help us to trust that we always held by you. Amen.