

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Matthew 27: 45ff

The Death of Jesus

45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, «Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?» that is, «My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?»

47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, «This man is calling for Elijah.»

48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink.

49 But the others said, «Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.»

50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

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

Believe it or not, I have read essays of scholars who try to play down this moment. Jesus doesn't really mean it, they say; he is just quoting a psalm; he only wants to show that scripture is being fulfilled; he recites the psalm's terrible first line because he knows it ends in joy.

I don't believe this!

I believe that Jesus is actually experiencing the deepest depth of human anguish. His cry is genuine. He speaks here in his native Aramaic, because in deep distress we all fall into our mother tongue, don't we?

Jesus is in his most desperate hour. He experiences complete abandonment.

And this tells us that the way to resurrection is through the experience of pain and dying. They cannot be bypassed.

Neither in Jesus' life and death, nor in ours.

There are innumerable ways crucifixion can be experienced. There are innumerable ways that human beings finally reach their cross.

Maybe what we've long feared has come true: Our mother has got Alzheimer's or our son is on drugs. Maybe there is no money for the rent, or we've been stranded in the same dull job for years and probably won't find something better. Maybe we've never found the life partner we've always longed for. Maybe we are stuck in bitterness or blame, in envy or resentment...

One way or another, all of us learn that in our life with God there comes a time when the only way to new life is by enduring and accepting a measure of pain that breaks everything apart.

There was nothing sentimental about Jesus' Good Friday, and there is nothing sentimental about our own Good Fridays, either.

When we live through our own Good Friday, we are confronted with death, nothing more and nothing less. In every crucifixion there is a death we need to die.

I once heard a colleague talking about a personal Good Friday she had experienced. She told us how on a Good Friday, after years of addiction, she'd made her way to a church. And she faced the fact that her whole life had been a big lie. She felt that she needed to die in order to be alive again. And she told us what needed to die: her numbness, she said, needed to die. The hard shell that she had acquired over the years needed to crack open and fall off. Her constant

pretense that everything was fine needed to die. Her despair needed to die. The lie that suffering and death have the last word. Her isolation needed to die. The illusion that she could handle things alone. Her pride and idealized self-image needed to die... And then she began to face the darkness and confusion within her. Then her shame needed to die, and only then she began to trust a love that would never desert her.

It is years ago, but I will never forget how she talked about this terrible pain that to her was just the pain of Christ on the cross.

And it helped me to understand that watching Christ die on the cross, is also meditating that fact that we have to die, too.

It helps me to reflect what it is that needs to die in my life so that love can break me open to experience resurrection...

If I look at my life, well, there are some things that need to die: self-doubt, self-rejection sometimes, the fear that I am not good enough, that I must prove my worth in order to be loved by God and others....

For other people it may be a relationship that needs to die or be radically transformed. Or self-hatred some of us are carrying around. Maybe an old pattern of behaviour needs to die. Some unhealthy way of seeing ourselves that doesn't serve life at all... Can you see what I mean when I say that on our Good Fridays we, or something in us has to die?

Jesus experienced total abandonment on the cross, for although God the Father in fact was with him, God the Son knew nothing about it. In the wilderness of our own despair, we also, like Jesus, may have no feeling or awareness that God is near.

Our prayer may be dry, our heart heavy as a stone, our words empty, our minds confused, desperate, unable to think straight... God may seem impossibly far away... our longing is there, but something crucial has fallen apart, and we hear only silence, and can feel no reassuring touch...

And still, even in the centre of total abandonment, God is with us. God embraces the void. God doesn't take it away, he doesn't wipe it out, but with overflowing love and compassion he shares our void, our pain, our abandonment. Like Jesus we don't see God at all; but even our abandonment happens within God.

This is where trust comes in, radical trust. The old self that we think is our only self is falling apart. There may be nothing we can do but endure the process, letting ourselves be dismantled and unmade while something new awaits. And of course we feel utterly lost. And sometimes for a longer time than we'd ever thought we could bear.

But remembering the words of Jesus from the cross can give us hope.

If we know that Christ entered and continues to enter human anguish and abandonment, then we know that our pain is not some private and meaningless crucifixion of our own.

It is the crucifixion of Christ in which we share.

In the times of most awful suffering in our lives we have entered Christ's abandonment, just as Christ has entered ours.

The more completely we feel God's absence, the more fully we are one with Christ...

Crazy, but good to say on Good Friday, isn't it? Good to say on so many Good Fridays that people have to live through...

With Christ's word from the cross loneliness becomes an encounter. When we feel bereft and cut off from God, we are intimately joined with Jesus, and he with us, although we may not feel his presence, and must take this claim on faith.

Jesus' loneliest words from the cross weave us into a fabric of relationship with one another and with God that neither suffering nor death can destroy. His abandonment marks the end of ours. His question to God is actually a promise to us: even God's silence is filled with God.

We claim this promise for ourselves when we are willing to "take up our cross" and the spiritual discipline that goes with it.

When we suffer and feel abandoned, we must take time to look and listen inwardly for Jesus. We must be willing to find a quiet, private place and to open ourselves to him. We must let ourselves feel our neediness and pain, our loneliness and fear, and let Christ be with us in whatever way he wants to be present to us and with us.

We may become aware of Christ beside us or within us.

If we sense his suffering, we may want to help him, because we know what it feels like to be abandoned.

If we sense his strength, we may want to ask for his help, for he knows distress. Or we may not sense his presence at all and may need to wait patiently in the darkness, trusting that he is with us at a level that we just can't feel at the moment.

As we keep turning to Christ in our suffering, accepting the fact that he is with us even if we know nothing about it, we may find ourselves inspired and empowered to make necessary changes in our lives. We may be led to protest and stand up... with a courage that we never knew we had.

As for the suffering that we are powerless to change, Jesus' companionship will help us persevere.

Sometimes Christ will even give us the mysterious but vivid sense that we are sharing in his crucifixion and the new life that awaits beyond it. This conviction can bring a careful, a very fine, maybe even fragile sense of joy...

It's not just that we know that we do not suffer alone – we also sense that we are somehow sharing in Christ's work, that the pain we have been given to bear is our own small way of sharing in Christ's pain - and thus in the salvation of the world.

If I understand Christ's cross and his word from the cross like that, I can look back at many Good Fridays in my life, and feel at an amazing peace with them... And I am sure, you can, too.

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

Jesus' painful cry can give us the courage to die the death we need to die, trusting that God's hidden hands will carry us through.

Take some time now to let Jesus come close.
Let us remain in silence and try to sense Jesus' presence.
Rest in him.

Silence

Prayer

Holy Jesus,
there was no suffering like yours.
I am silent in the darkness
your darkness
my darkness
the darkneses of this world.
There can be no words.
Only trust and worship.
Amen.