

Good Friday - Tenebrae, March 25, 2005
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Matthew 27: 46
"He Was Forsaken"

And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli lama-sabachthani?' that is 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

According to the four Evangelists, Jesus spoke seven times from the cross. He dies, as it were, one word at a time, and for two millennia the church has counted out those words like silver dollars. During the six hours of his dying he expressed the full range of human anguish—from the absence of water to the absence of God. But in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks from the cross but once.

The four Gospels are written in Greek but during his earthly life, the Jew, Jesus, would have spoken a dialect of Hebrew. But only this one sentence does the Evangelist quote in Hebrew, *Eli, Eli, lama-sabachthani*, because he wants to explain how the bystanders could have mistaken the cry to God, Eli, for a cry to Elijah. How typical. In the fog of a public execution of an innocent man, the most heart-wrenching word of Jesus to his Father is misinterpreted. It's a small detail, but it contributes to the terrible almost clinical realism of the scene.

Of the seven words Jesus spoke, why memorialize this one? It expresses no love for his mother or compassion for his executioners. It's not a grand word. Jesus is engulfed in the chaos of dying. He is hanging there in the dark. He cannot breathe; he cannot see; what is left but to cry out—to the God who has abandoned him?

In one Gospel he commends his spirit to God, in another he regally announces the completion of his mission, but in Matthew his life ends with a question. It is a cry into the night in which the human spirit is broken down to its most basic units of anguish—Daddy, why?

The church calls it his cry of dereliction—which is a terrible word. A derelict ship is about to sink. The men and even the rats have abandoned it to the gale.

Some years ago a famous scholar did a comparison of the death of Socrates and the death of Jesus. This is not the first time this has been done. The early opponents of Christianity often made this comparison. When the Greek philosopher Socrates was condemned to die, he drank his hemlock with great serenity. In the face of death—with no god to call on—Socrates discussed the pros and cons of immortality with composure and reasonableness. He died the way we would like to die. With dignity. The Divinity School houses the Institute on Care at the End of Life. It brings together the disciplines of medicine, sociology, and theology in order to help provide the terminally ill with a good death. A death like Socrates'.

When we turn to the death of Jesus, we see it was nothing like the death of Socrates. In the Garden of Gethsemane Mark says he was trembling. Matthew says he threw himself to the ground, while Luke says he was sweating and his sweat fell like great drops of blood. He doesn't want to drink the cup. He doesn't want to be alone. Can't you watch for just one hour? When the end comes he is not in control but is calling out desperately like a child abandoned by its parent.

There are ways of softening this picture, of course, ways of making it less medical and more endurable, the way bad religious art tries to make suffering tolerable. The words "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" are the first sentence of Psalm 22. Some have asked, Was not Jesus, the pious believer, simply reciting a verse he had known since childhood? Dying people, amazingly, revert to prayers that formed them in their youth—the way a person who hasn't spoken for days may recite the Lord's Prayer. "Now I lay me down to sleep," says the 90-year old in the nursing home, "I pray the Lord my soul to keep."

Psalm 22 reads like a blueprint for crucifixion:

All who see me mock at me,
they make mouths at me, they wag their heads;
He committed his cause to the Lord
let him deliver him, let him rescue him,
for he delights in him!"
Yea dogs are found about me;
a company of evildoers encircle me;
they have pierced my hand and feet—
I can count all my bones

Yet the Psalmist comes round to a magnificent statement of hope and trust in the Lord. "To him shall all the proud of the earth bow down."

So isn't it, at least, possible that Jesus intended to pray the whole Psalm, including its affirmative conclusion? Thus he was not abandoned, nor did he feel totally forsaken. He would have prayed the whole Psalm. He simply died before he could complete it. Or the tradition did not remember it.

This interpretation opens the way to a happier crucifixion and a less mysterious God. Perhaps Jesus didn't suffer quite as much as we thought he did. Or perhaps he only suffered as a human being; there was always a divine part of him floating above that hideous scene, untouched by fear and pain.

This gentler interpretation makes it easier to think about a beautiful death. Death takes its place as a natural stage of life on the way to immortality. Socrates was right. There's nothing to be afraid of. When St. Paul called death "the last enemy to be destroyed," or when the poet Dylan Thomas wrote to his dying father, "Do not go gentle into that good night /Rage, rage, against the dying of the light," they must have been depressed, because death is as natural as life.

But if that's the case, why this cry of dereliction? Why this 'abandon ship' if it's really not going to sink?

There's an old saying about Jesus that casts light on our question. An ancient theologian said, "What he did not assume, he did not redeem." Which means: if there is any part of this human carnival that Jesus didn't take on himself, then that part is left outside redemption. What he did not assume he did not redeem.

Have you ever been tempted? so was he. Thus your temptations have been redeemed in his. Have you ever been hated, so was he. You have a place in him. Have you ever been lonely, afraid, without a place called home—so was he. Have you ever

had doubts not only about yourself but about God? Have you ever cried when you're sad. Do you sweat when you are afraid? So did he. So did he. You have a place in him.

A psychiatrist once told me about a patient he said was delusional. "She believes God knows what she's thinking," he said. I thought to myself, "Oh, oh, I may be delusional, too." But then do you really want a God who doesn't know what you are thinking? What you are fearing? A God to whom certain rooms in your life are off-limits? Are there deep places where we don't want God to go?

Our first instinct is to say, Yes, you betcha! But when we stand at the foot of the cross and think it through, we say No. For, what he did not assume, he did not redeem.

At Christmas we celebrated the Incarnation. We celebrated God taking on some flesh. We called him Immanuel, God with us, but we were thinking of an adorable baby. Good Friday is Immanuel with a vengeance--when we begin to glimpse the full extent of his flesh.

Jesus is the baby alright, he's the one abandoned in the dumpster; he's also the scared and pregnant teenager with no options; he's the jobless guy loitering on East Main; his home is an AIDS ward or a public lock-up or a refugee camp; he's being tortured to death in any one of 106 nations on the face of the earth. He is a suicidal teenager. He is you at your lowest pulse. He has gone derelict.

You may ask, Was Jesus really abandoned by God or did he only feel abandoned? My response to your excellent questions is: Sorry friends, that's deeper than I can go. Your preacher tonight is like the guide who says, "I've taken you this far, but here we part company. I can go no farther." There have been bolder guides, of course. St. John of the Cross spoke of the believer's dark night of soul. Luther spoke tremblingly of the hidden God.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that his generation might have to live as if there were no God but always in the presence of God. It's significant that Bonhoeffer did not write these words in a University but a concentration camp.

Jesus was forsaken by God. The one who promised Israel I will never leave you or forsake you. Can a mother forget her nursing child? So I will not forget you. And the child protested against it—to God.

That's a start for you and me. When we are plunged into a deep place and feel abandoned by God, we will cry out--to God. We may feel we are praying--desperately, fervently, stupidly--to an Absence. Like believers left hanging in the dark.

But I say, Go ahead, rage, rage against the dying of the light, in the name of him who for your sake cried, My God, my God, why?