

"MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?"

Good Friday, March 28, 1975

4th Word in Ecumenical Service at St. Paul's Episcopal Church

Matthew 27:46

Whenever the assignments are handed out for a service like this, I suspect that the participating ministers all ask themselves secretly, "I wonder who's going to get that one - what is it, No. 4? - the one where Jesus says, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"

Nobody wants that one, except perhaps a few of the young Turks who want to show off.

It presents problems, this fourth word. I recall very well when I was in school way back around the 7th or 8th grade (it was an Episcopal school, by the way), we students argued with one another over this saying. If Jesus really asked that question, one of us insisted, he could not have been the Son of God.

And questions of Christology aside, doesn't this word from the cross cut down everything having to do with faith in God, not only for Jesus, but for us? If at the end Jesus felt forsaken, doesn't this tell us on the best authority that all that he did came to nothing in the end?

But then, of course, the world is not lacking for helpful explanations. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This is the opening line of the 22nd Psalm. And that is a psalm that ends on a note of triumph. It seems likely then that Jesus in his agony was meditating upon that Psalm of faith. As was the custom among his people, he spoke the first verse to signify that he had the whole passage in mind. This puts his outcry in a much more favorable light.

But maybe that lets us off too easily. I am not happy with the notion that this one cry in the midst of torture and betrayal discredits Jesus' entire mission. On the other hand, I don't think we should try to explain the cry away. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me." Regardless of where Psalm 22 ends up, those words expressed a genuine feeling of abandonment for the Psalmist.

I once had the privilege of sharing in a preaching mission with the late Clovis Chappell. I had reservations about Chappell when he first arrived. He talked like a Tennessee sharecropper, and rather looked like one as well. He was way up in years and he was a Methodist. I couldn't think of any more unlikely formula for wisdom.

But Clovis Chappell was a great preacher. He had a way of going right to the heart of things. I treasure a little book of his on the Words of the Cross that I bought on that occasion.

In his sermon on the Fourth Word, Clovis Chappell asks: "Why did Jesus utter this bitter cry?" "I think," the preacher answers, "the simplest explanation is the one that is true. He uttered it because he felt himself forsaken."

I, too, think that was the simple truth of the matter. Jesus suffered. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews put it, he endured everything that we have to endure. And this is the supreme suffering, this feeling of desolation. More than the lead-filled whips, more than the nails, more than the burning sun, more than the appalling spectre of human sadism, is this suffering of one who looks into the darkness and does not see: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

"Why?"

Haven't you asked it? And you didn't need to go to a cross to ask it either. Some of us ask "Why?", every day. Perhaps in some way all of us do.

"Why did Jesus utter this bitter cry?" "The simplest explanation is the one that is true. He uttered it because he felt himself forsaken." He felt the way we feel, and he wondered why.

But there is one more thing we need to note about that feeling and about the question that grew out of it.

Do you see where Jesus directed them?

"My God" "My God."

Do you see that even this saying from the Cross, especially this saying from the Cross, is a prayer?

And I wonder when you have felt abandoned and when you have asked "why?" whether you have aimed your question the way Jesus did. Have you affirmed God's presence, even as you complained of his absence; have you trusted even as you despaired; have you prayed even as you saw yourself beyond helping. Have you cried out to your God?

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Is this the end?

I rather think this is where resurrection begins.

Pilgrim

Luke 1:

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