



Good Friday

with Canon Angela Tilby

Friday 29 March | The Liturgy of Good Friday at Exeter Cathedral

Psalm 22

My God, my God, look upon me; why hast thou forsaken me: and art so far from my health and from the words of my complaint?

O my God, I cry to thee in the day-time, but thou hearest not: and in the night season also I take no rest.

And thou continuest holy: O thou worship of Israel.

Our fathers hoped in thee: they trusted in thee, and thou didst deliver them.

They called upon thee, and were holpen: they put their trust in thee, and were not confounded.

But as for me, I am a worm and no man: a very scorn of men, and the outcast of the people.

All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying,

He trusted in God, that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, if he will have him.

But thou art he that took me out of my mother's womb: thou wast my hope, when I hanged yet upon my mother's breasts.

I have been left unto thee ever since I was born: thou art my God, even from my mother's womb.

O go not far from me, for trouble is hard at hand: and there is none to help me.

Many oxen are come about me: fat bulls of Basan close me in on every side.

They gape upon me with their mouths: as it were a ramping and a roaring lion.

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart also in the midst of my body is even like melting wax.

My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaveth to my gums: and thou shalt bring me into the dust of death.

For many dogs are come about me: and the council of the wicked layeth siege against me.

They pierced my hands and my feet; I may tell all my bones: they stand staring and looking upon me.

They part my garments among them: and cast lots upon my vesture.

But be thou not far from me, O Lord: thou art my succour, haste thee to help me.

Deliver my soul from the sword: my darling from the power of the dog.

Save me from the lion's mouth: though hast heard me also from among the horns of the unicorns.

I will declare thy Name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee.

O praise the Lord, ye that fear him: magnify him, all ye of the seed of Jacob, and fear him, all ye seed of Israel;

For he hath not despised, nor abhorred, the low estate of the poor: he hath not hid his face from him, but when he called unto him, he heard him.

My praise is of thee in the great congregation: my vows will I perform in the sight of them that fear him.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied: they that seek after the Lord shall praise him; your heart shall live for ever.

All the ends of the world shall remember themselves, and be turned unto the Lord: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before him.

For the kingdom is the Lord's: and he is the Governor among the people.

All such as be fat upon earth: have eaten and worshipped.

All they that go down into the dust shall kneel before him: and no man hath quickened his own soul.

My seed shall serve him: they shall be counted unto the Lord for a generation.

They shall come, and the heavens shall declare his righteousness: unto a people that shall still be born, whom the Lord hath made.

Psalm 22 is the Psalm of the passion. It contains the words that Jesus had on his lips as he died: 'My God, my God look upon me; why hast thou forsaken me...'. It is a prayer of desolation, but also of great intimacy: 'My God, my God...'. Here is a psalm of abandonment by God that perhaps can only be said by one who knows God, by a Son of God.

It suggests that you have to be very close to God to be abandoned by God. A paradox. Here, ultimate abandonment and ultimate intimacy come from the same source. And this makes sense in our human experience. It is when our most intimate relationships break down that we feel most abandoned. Think of the way the loss of a mother in infancy is never quite healed. The level of lostness is related to the level of closeness.

I have suggested this week that the Psalms are in a very special way the heart of the Church's prayer to Christ. This is one reason, I think, why Richard Hooker, perhaps our one truly great Anglican theologian, a native of Devon, believed so passionately that the Church of England should keep its liturgy and not be driven by those who thought only spontaneous prayer was truly authentic. Spontaneity has its place of course, in any attempt to prayer, but praying the Psalms gives words when we have no words, and helps us to pray 'in' Christ and 'with' Christ.

Praying the Psalms opens up for us what it means for Christ to take on our human nature, to enter the depths of our experience, to heal our wounds and to raise us up with him.

Our forebears relished the Psalms. I have been in a cave in Egypt where the opening phrases of the Psalter were inscribed on the walls by some ancient Christian hermit. He, or perhaps she, probably knew them all by heart and may have recited the whole hundred and fifty in a day or a few days. One early Christian from the Egyptian desert was described as saying a hundred psalms each day.

The point is that the Psalms give us the whole sweep of human experience as our place of encounter with God: praise and sorrow, order and disorder, creation and destruction. They don't let us escape into a false religious high where there is only victory, success, money and numbers, immediacy and big egos.

The Psalms were, and are, Christ's prayer, his thanksgiving, his pleading, his protest and his deliverance. Through the psalms Christ prays for abandoned, suffering humanity, every day, every hour. Through the Psalms we accompany Christ on his human journey from Bethlehem to Calvary and beyond.

Like the monks of ancient Egypt, the brothers and sisters in religious communities keep set times of prayer to say the Psalms, not only through the day, but through the night. They believe that Christ prays through them for the sleepless, the abandoned, the godless, for those who have lost faith or never had it. If you want to come close to Christ, pray the Psalms. Morning and evening, night and day. Join the great stream of prayer based on the Jewish prayer book, pointing to the birth and passion and death of Christ and his coming kingdom. All human life is there.

But to come back to today, Good Friday and Christ's prayer of abandonment. 'My God, My God, look upon me, why hast thou forsaken me?' The experience of abandonment is part of everyday human life. It also happens to many faithful Christians in their life of prayer when they find they can no longer feel the presence of God. It is when prayer simply goes dead on us and we become restless and coldly distanced. There is in the Christian spiritual tradition a recognition of what is sometimes called the dark night of the soul. It can be distressing and disorientating. But it can also be a time of growth. It may be that we are being asked to find a new level of detachment from our busy and restless egos, or that we are being challenged to simple obedience to God in spite of our lack of fervour or warm feelings.

This happened to the much-loved twentieth century saint Teresa of Calcutta. She wrote about it in her journal, describing the suffering it caused her. In the end she found she just had to press on without comfort and consolation, and even at times, without much belief in God at all.

Did God abandon Christ on the cross? It seems so in this psalm, I am always struck by the sheer weirdness of the way reality is distorted by suffering. The Psalmist speaks of being a 'worm and no man', reduced to a crawling thing, and there are those fat bulls gaping with their mouths like a lion, the yapping dogs, the horns of the unicorns. Creation turned against him. Did God abandon Christ? However we answer that question – and I think the answer will say more about us than it does about God – the Psalmist does not look back nostalgically to a time when God seemed close and all was fruitful or successful. He – or she – looks rather to a time of greatest vulnerability: 'I have been left unto thee ever since I was born: thou art my God even from my mother's womb'.

I don't think any of us have any clear recollections of our birth. It is a trauma, a dark and naked passage into time and light and relationship. We haven't even breathed independently until we come out of our mother's body. We are not even selves. We have no names, no memories, no expectations. Everything lies ahead. Everything is given. I love that wonderful, puzzled look babies sometimes have when they encounter something new, and the way their eyes fix on someone or something known and they break into smiles. Trust and love, relationship and freedom are given and received once again. When the Psalmist questions his abandonment it is to the mystery of birth that he returns.

'On you I was cast ever since I was born

You are my God even from my mother's womb'.

And for me, here is the hint of that rebirth from darkness and which we call resurrection. The God who made the universe out of nothing is the God whose Son was laid in the tomb. The God who gives being to every atom of the universe and to every creature, brings his Son back from the valley of the shadow.

And that is our hope this Good Friday. Though we walk with Christ in his journey to death, ultimately we need fear no evil 'thy rod and thy staff comfort me'.

It is no accident that the 23rd Psalm, The Lord is My Shepherd, follows the 22nd. It is part of human life to die, we cannot help it, and we are in a sense dying from the moment of our birth. We come crying into this world, we are exposed to the vulnerabilities and longings of childhood, we experience the accidents and insults of everyday life, the bodily and mental frailties of old age, the heart wrench of bereavement and loss.

Sharing in the passion of Christ means that when we go through the shadows of this world Christ goes with us, he is already there ahead of us.

There should be a sense of relief at the end of Good Friday. The sufferings of Christ are now over. And we rest, simply held in being by the will and purpose of God. It is finished. And what happens next is not for me to speak of. Except to say that I believe and trust that on the third day the tomb was indeed found empty, and because of that we can all come through to a new birth and a new beginning, as Christ the Good Shepherd comes looking for us, calling us home to the Father of all, who said 'Let there be Light' at the creation, and floods the universe with new and endless life.

Prayer:

Restless with grief and fear,

the abandoned turn to you:

in every hour of trial,

good Lord, deliver us,

O God, most holy, God most strong,

whose wisdom is the cross of Christ. Amen.