

In the first ten minutes or so of our worship service today, we have taken a dramatic turn. We moved from proclaiming Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, where he was welcomed by crowds of people waving palm branches and shouting his praises, to just minutes later hearing the disturbing details of his final hours and death.

The dramatic highs and lows of this Passion Sunday indicate that we have now entered Holy Week. It is an enormously meaningful week for any Christian who takes their faith seriously. I remind you that the Good Friday worship service this week at 11:00 a.m. at St. George's is our opportunity to express during this holiest of weeks the seriousness with which we take our Christian faith as we prepare for Easter.

Today's gospel account of the Passion of Christ contains some of the most memorable and meaningful passages in all the Christian scriptures. In it we hear the feckless Pilate ask Jesus the incriminating question: "Are you the King of the Jews?" We hear the mindless mob respond to the suggestion that Jesus be shown mercy with its bloodcurdling scream to "crucify him!" We hear the sneering chief priests and scribes mock Jesus, now crucified, by saying "He saved others; he cannot save himself." And after Jesus died, we hear the understandably stunned centurion confess that "Truly this man was God's Son."

But what I would like us to think about today, is not what others were saying on that horrific occasion, but something Jesus cried out after enduring hours of torture on his cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

If you know this story well, then you know that Jesus was speaking words to a well-known hymn of his time, that everyone within earshot would have recognized as what we call Psalm 22. The opening line to that hymn is the mournful cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Can you recall the last time you used the word "forsake" or "forsaken" in a conversation? If you are a perennially disappointed Toronto Maple Leafs fan than you would have reason to use the word regularly. But otherwise, it is not a word most of us use commonly, although it is a powerful word.

To forsake something, or someone, means to give up on them, to break off from them, to renounce them, to desert or abandon them. To forsake someone is to withdraw your help or your friendship from them.

Have you forsaken anyone, or anything, lately?

Have you been forsaken lately?

We can never know for certain what Jesus was thinking as he approached death, but to my ear those words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" sound like desperation and desolation. How do you interpret what Jesus said?

I imagine that Jesus' cry of desolation was in part a consequence of the physical torture he had endured. He had been beaten and flogged and nailed to a cross. The pain would have been excruciating. But I suspect he also suffered from the nasty emotional pain of abandonment, which perhaps you know something about.

At his time of greatest need, Jesus had been abandoned, forsaken, by most of the people who previously had been closest to him. And now it seemed as if even the unimaginable had happened, that he had been forsaken by God as well. Truly, no person misses the presence of God more than someone who previously had been deeply conscious of God's presence in their life.

What exactly was the point in presenting to us this unappealing portrayal of a suffering Jesus? Even an impoverished pretend king riding on a donkey under a canopy of waving palm branches was more inspiring than Jesus as the broken and tormented soul on a cross.

Is not the point of it all to show us that there was something intensely human about that pitiful cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Was it not necessary, to demonstrate that Jesus is indeed the Savior of a frail humanity, that he too experienced the depths of sorrow and anguish and suffering that is sometimes part of the human experience? For us truly to believe, and to find hope in our Christian faith, did we not need to see that Jesus’ pain was as real as our pain and his cry of anguish as real as ours? Does it help you to believe in Jesus, knowing that he also had felt forsaken by God?

No matter how faithful we attempt to be as Christians, it is not uncommon, when we come face to face with a situation beyond our ability or strength to comprehend, to feel that God has forgotten us. Perhaps we have prayed desperately for a loved one to live, but that loved one died. Or prayed for a relationship to be restored, that was not restored. Maybe we prayed for a positive outcome or solution to some other type of conflict or difficulty in our life, but nothing changed for the better. Perhaps it was during those moments that we too cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” or some other words of distress to that effect.

It can happen to even the most devout and determined believer. Remember the story of Job? He lived centuries before Jesus. Job was good man. He is described as “blameless and upright; respectful of God; and he consciously resisted evil.” In that regard, Job was not so different from you and me. At least I will credit us with trying to live our life in a way that is pleasing to God.

As the story goes, old Job was rich in lands. His harvests were abundant. His barns bulged with crops and grains. His cattle multiplied. His family setting was happy. His wealth continually increased and so did his stellar reputation. You might say that Job had it made. He had everything anyone could want, and he was fully prepared to give God the glory for all of it.

Then suddenly, and without warning, Job’s whole world tumbled in. He was stripped of his wealth. His harvests were destroyed, his barns burned, and his cattle stolen. His family disintegrated, his reputation withered, and he was smitten with a dire disease. Adding insult to these multiple injuries, it all happened through no fault or transgression on Job’s part. He was an innocent victim.

But his world fell apart all the same, leaving Job despondent and crying out, “When I looked for good, evil came, and when I waited for light, darkness came.” In other words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

When have you felt forsaken by God? When have you or someone you know felt abandoned or ignored by God? Has your life ever taken such a downward turn that you could not help thinking that if God existed then God certainly did not care much about you and your suffering? Have you ever come close to feeling anything like that? If your answer is “no,” then I have to say, “lucky you.”

Most of us have experienced how over time our opinions can change about the significance of a troubling event or circumstance on our lives. Do you know what I mean? Something happened that originally caused us great upset, perhaps even to the point of our wondering “My God, why have you forsaken me?” But at some later point later, when we looked back on those difficult events and asked God to help us make some sense of them, we see how even the dark and low points in our life can mark the beginning of a turn for the better.

The crucifixion of Jesus was one such dark and low point in the history of humanity. It also marked the beginning of a turn for the better. One thing this tells us as Christians, is that we need to take the long view of life. As followers of Jesus – the one who was crucified, the one who in the moment of his death appeared to be no more than a good idea that had failed, a pathetic and defeated picture of brokenness – as Christians we need to take the long view. We need to trust God enough to move beyond whatever trials we face in the present by having faith in our God-given future.

Frederick Buechner is a well-known Presbyterian clergyman and author in the United States. He tells this story about what happened to him once when he was feeling forsaken by God. One day Buechner was driving in his car when the burden of his worries became so great that he knew he must pull over to the side of the road and park for a while to regain his composure. Buechner was a dedicated Christian, but at that point in his life he was terribly depressed and horribly afraid because his daughter was very ill, and he did not know if she would survive. Buechner and his entire family were in turmoil. Buechner was no longer certain where, or even if, God was to be found in the mess that his life had become.

On that day, as Buechner sat at the side of the road hoping desperately for answers and reassurance from God, a car drove past. On its license plate was the one word that Buechner needed most of all to be reminded of at that exact moment. The word on the license plate, in bold capital letters, was ‘TRUST.’ It was as if God had whispered in Buechner’s ear to “Trust. Just trust me. You have got to trust me.”

Feeling reassured, Buechner got back in his car and continued driving. A short time later, he published in the local newspaper a story about this most unusual wakeup call to trust God. The owner of the automobile with the TRUST license plate read the story. It turned out that he worked for a bank as its trust officer, hence his vanity license plate bearing the word TRUST. The banker did some investigating, found out where Buechner lived, and showed up unannounced at Buechner’s home to give him the license plate as a gift. Many years later that rusty and battered license plate still occupied a conspicuous place of honor on a shelf in Buechner’s home. It was for him as holy a relic as he had ever seen, and his daily reminder that Christians must trust, no matter what.

If there is a central message in Jesus’ crucifixion that we Christians need to carry with us into Holy Week, it is that we can trust that God will, in God’s own time, make all things right and well. We can trust because we know that today’s story of the Passion of Jesus, as gloomy and hopeless as it reads, is not the end of the story. As Christians we know that the cross is not the ending. We know that Easter is coming. We know that God did not forsake Jesus. We know, even if at times we need to be reminded, that God will never forsake us. **Amen.**

Palm Sunday

10 April 2022

Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming