

July 2, 2021

Psalm 22: 1-11

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

³ Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.

⁴ In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.

⁵ To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

⁶ But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.

⁷ All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

⁸ 'Commit your cause to the LORD; let God deliver—
let God rescue the one in whom God delights!'

⁹ Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.

¹⁰ On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

¹¹ Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

The picture of Jesus given us in the gospels is of one who took time away to pray. We also know that Jesus, like many Jews, patterned his praying and found language for his praying through the psalms. And even as we get glimpses of some of what Jesus prayed, as well as the prayer he taught his disciples to pray (Our Father...), the prayers Jesus prayed during Holy Week were different.

Jesus chose his path to suffering and death quite deliberately, confronting the religious authorities and his people with a different vision of God's kingdom than the rule of power and might fuelled by hate and vengeful destruction of enemies. In a world of violence and force, the power of love can only win by a steadfastness that entrusts itself to a higher life, a new life, after it is crushed and broken by all that force can do against it. This is the gospel story – the death and resurrection of eternal love. But how would Jesus the human find the strength and courage to face all this violent hate against him? How would he find the faith to trust resurrection could come even after such a terrible kind of dying?

In the earliest gospel accounts – Mark and Matthew, Jesus utters one prayerful cry from the cross before he dies. This cry is a direct quote of v. 1 of Psalm 22. The fact that it is a direct quote tells us this psalm gave Jesus language to express what was going on inside him those last few hours of his life. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” If we believe Jesus is the presence of God and yet experiences in his final hours the absence of God, what is this telling us? It is telling us God is experiencing forsakenness and abandonment, while at the same time being present as God. It means that anyone who opens their heart to the presence of God in Jesus will never be forsaken even if they experience feeling forsaken. It means God in Jesus passes through forsakenness so that those who pray to God in their time of trouble need not feel forsaken again.

And yet... Psalm 22 also reveals to us that sometimes we can lose God in our souls and our prayers are often a seeking of God once again. Why do we lose God? Because what we are undergoing has shaken us and whatever faith we have built up to that point is insufficient to help us hold fast through the valley of the shadow of death we are undergoing. We are experiencing a death. Holy Saturday (between Good Friday and Easter Sunday) is a time where we can feel abandoned and alone. But the way we tell the story as Christians is that Easter Sunday will come. How does Psalm 22 tell this story?

1-2 – I experience trouble so overwhelming, that I lose connection with God and myself. The experience of trouble surrounds me and fills me and I feel all alone in the depths of my soul.

3-5 – I am reminded that God was there for me in the past. I had built up a reservoir of faith that trusted in God and was given victory and new life repeatedly. Why can I not feel such trust now?

6-7 – Ah... what has happened is that my self-worth has been demolished because of repeated taunts, contempt, mistreatment, humiliation and abuse by other people. When people abuse us repeatedly over time we begin to internalize their contempt and ridicule, and we see ourselves through their eyes. We are but “a worm and not human”. Is this what indigenous children now dead and buried experienced?... Faith and our sense of self-worth are intertwined... We believe more powerfully when we feel loved and cherished, and we feel befriended rather than alone.

8 – Rescue and deliverance begin with openness to the possibility it can come despite it all – “Commit your cause to the Lord...”

9-10 – I must be precious to God since God was creatively present in my birth and in that core maternal love that gave me life. Such a maternal God would never abandon me.

11 – From feeling completely forsaken and abandoned by God (vs. 1-2), the journey of praying through this psalm brings us to new possibilities of hope: “Do not be far from me...” Maybe God has not abandoned me after all. Maybe my praying will lead to new rescue toward wholeness... Can I believe?

But what of those children?... Even as their resurrection to new life must await life after death rather than this life, perhaps in their death they are calling us to wake up, to recognize a truth long buried, that God did not abandon them but was crucified and buried with them. And even as God will raise them up in the life to come, God will raise up their voices now in this life by confronting us collectively as Canadians who were complicit in their crucifixion. What must we die to in order to experience resurrection? On this Canada day Friday, what must we die to, confess and confront as Canadians, in order to rise up to a new tomorrow?

This psalm engages us personally in our own struggles, our own forsakenness, and it engages us collectively as people. For our own personal journey to wholeness is also connected to our collective journey to wholeness. In the welfare of and justice for the most vulnerable is our own welfare and wholeness to be found.

PRAYER: We pray to you, O God, on our own behalf and on behalf of those who no longer have a voice in this world... We open our hearts to listen, to listen to Jesus crucified speaking to us on their behalf... Give us hearts capable of listening. Give us hearts opened wide to feel, to love, and to experience the renewal of resurrection toward justice... May whatever fear we are carrying give way to trust in the wholeness of healing and reconciliation yet to be experienced... Amen.