

Jesus Forsaken by God (Mark 15:33-39)

(A sermon preached in St Andrew's church, St Andrews, 1 April 2007)

Just before Jesus died he summoned all his remaining strength to cry out, loudly, for all to hear, these terrible words: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' 'why have you abandoned me?' It is not how one would have expected a prophet, a holy man, or, still less, a Messiah, to die. Jesus died abandoned by his God, the God he called Father, the God he had faithfully served up to this last moment of his life. If we think back over Mark's whole passion narrative, we can see how this final God-forsakenness of Jesus caps a crescendo of abandonment that characterizes the last hours of Jesus. Already at the last supper Jesus knows that one of his disciples is about to betray him and the others to desert him. In Gethsemane they do, and even Peter, who had been so sure he would not, utterly dissociates himself from Jesus. Only the group of women disciples are faithful to the end and they are obliged to watch him die only from a distance. The Jewish authorities reject Jesus. The crowd to whom Pilate offers to release Jesus disown him - even though some of them had doubtless cheered his arrival in Jerusalem a few days before. But by the time the soldiers nail him to the cross, the deepest dimension of Jesus' abandonment, the most terrible, his abandonment by God, is obvious for all to see. The onlookers throw it in his face, laughing at him: 'He saved others but he can't save himself' ... 'Let the Messiah come down from the cross!' The subtext is: God has abandoned him, God has let this happen and is not intervening to save him.

Then for three hours darkness descends, the darkness of death, the darkness in which God leaves people to die. The onlookers fall silent. Jesus is left alone to know his abandonment by God. When at the last he cries out to that absent God, protesting his abandonment, some of the bystanders mistake his words. He must be calling for Elijah to come to save him. The misunderstanding merely rubs the fact of Jesus' abandonment in. God does not send Elijah to rescue him in the nick of time. Jesus dies.

All this is so shocking we may be tempted to alleviate it, to lift the darkness a little. Surely Jesus was not really abandoned by God? But we disbelieve Jesus' abandonment at our peril, because, strange as it may seem, the hope of the world and the hope of humanity are to be found in it. Mark's whole narrative of the crucifixion is directed to portraying Jesus' abandonment in the starkest possible way. It is the only aspect of the crucifixion that Mark emphasizes. It is not simply that Jesus, in the extreme of suffering, *felt* abandoned by God, as though that were an understandable mistake. The abandonment is a concrete reality. It is the undeniable fact that God left Jesus to die.

Yet there is another side to the matter, but one that we only really understand if we do not play down the abandonment. Jesus knew full well what he was doing when he walked into the trap that resulted in his death. He knew that his death was God's will. To die – and to die this sort of death – was the culmination of his mission from his Father. He anguished over that in Gethsemane, where he had to accept the fact that God would not deliver him. And when he prayed that terrible prayer 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' he was not despairing. Perhaps he was on the brink of despair, but his words are a stepping back from that brink, for God is still, for Jesus, 'my God,' even emphatically so, since he has chosen the words of a psalm that, unusually, repeat the words: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Even in his abandonment by God Jesus continues to trust the God whose will he is doing. God has abandoned him but he has not abandoned God.

Something in this horror - of the one who remains faithful to God in abandonment by God – leads the centurion, looking on, to say, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’ Through the centurion’s words Mark is telling us: This is where we can most truly perceive that Jesus is the Son of his Father. This is where we can most fully perceive his deity. This is where we find God - even if, like the centurion, we hardly know anything else of God.

How can that be? Well, let me return to something I said in the first of our Lent lectures: that the deepest dimension of our human plight is the absence of God. Suppose we ask: what’s wrong with the world? What’s wrong with humanity? What is it that God must put right because we cannot put it right ourselves?

The most popular answer today, I guess, is suffering. If we just look around the world or focus in on our own experiences with family or friends or our own lives, there is such massive suffering. Why does God allow suffering? Why do even the innocent, like little children, those who couldn’t possibly in any sense deserve what they get, suffer so terribly? Why is there extreme poverty, AIDS and cancer, war and oppression, tsunamis and hurricanes? Without trying to answer the question, what I want to do now is to point out that the deepest dimension of all suffering is abandonment. Bad enough to know that people have deserted you and left you to bear it all alone. Even worse: the sense that *God* has left you to suffer and die. People of all religions but also even people of no religion, instinctively almost, cry out to God in the extremities of life. But so often God does not seem to hear. The suffering at the heart of all serious suffering is abandonment by God. Even if the suffering person concludes that there is no God, the absence of God is just as real.

When Mark tells us that darkness descended on the dying Jesus for three hours, he says it was darkness that covered the whole earth. (We can translate it ‘the whole land’ but I think Mark meant more than that.) When Jesus entered that darkness his abandonment was no private misery. It was the darkness of suffering and death that covers everyone who suffers and dies in the absence of God. Jesus went there to be with them. He went there, impelled by God’s love, to bring God’s love to the unloved. His cross is God’s own act of loving and suffering solidarity with all who suffer the absence of God. It does not tell us why there is so much suffering, it does not remove suffering from the world – not yet, at least – but heals the suffering at the heart of all suffering, the Godforsakenness.

Let’s go back to our question: what’s wrong with the world? What’s wrong with humanity? What is it that God must put right because we cannot put it right ourselves? Another answer, less popular today, is: human wickedness. After all so much of the suffering of the world is caused by human wickedness. Or, if not by blatant wickedness, at least by culpable failure to attend to those who suffer, to relieve or even remove suffering when that is possible. And wickedness is endemic to human life. We know that if only we can set aside our addiction to delusion on this point. Quite ordinary people, made concentration camp guards, became not reluctant, but sadistic in making others suffer. It could happen to any of us. We all have it in us.

Wickedness is a turning away from God. It is opting for the absence of God. And God’s judgment on our human evil is very simply to leave us to the consequences of our turning away from him. He leaves us to suffer God’s absence. And in the end he leaves us to die, for without God the natural consequence of human life is to perish. The Bible says that death is God’s judgment on sin, and that is true in a very simple and obvious way. It is God’s verdict

on human life spoiled and ruined by our misuse of it. When we turn away from God we turn human life into something that is fit only to perish.

And yet God does not leave us. Jesus on the cross enters that Godforsakenness too. Jesus came to seek out the lost in all the dark places of human life, to bring God's love to them where they are. Whether their suffering the absence of God was innocent or culpable, whether they found themselves there incomprehensibly or took themselves there all too willingly, or whether, as for so many, the two are muddled and inextricable, Jesus was there too. He put himself too under that terrible divine verdict on human life. His was the only human life for which that verdict had not a shred of justification, but nevertheless he shared it in order to reach us who must otherwise perish under it.

The cross of Jesus is God's own act of loving and suffering solidarity with all who suffer the absence of God. I said that about innocent sufferers, and it is equally true for those who have no one but themselves to blame for their Godforsakenness. That's why we recognize God more truly in the cross than anywhere else. It's why we see what God's love really amounts to more clearly there than anywhere else. Jesus' terrible abandonment by God makes us face up to the full extremity of the world's plight without God, and to see that God's salvific love can and does reach even there.