

Godforsaken - Worship for Good Friday

Welcome and introduction

Welcome to worship at Trinity for Good Friday. This morning's service is based on the book *Godforsaken* by Stephen Cottrell. It invites us to focus on the final words of Jesus on the cross.

We'll hear readings from scripture, poems and reflections, and sing hymns together. In the middle of the service we'll listen together to some music, a time for personal prayer and reflection.

Once the service begins there will be no announcements, please follow on the slides or on the order of service.

We stand before the cross.

Let us worship God

Call to worship

Blessed are you, Lord God of our salvation,
to you be praise and glory for ever.
As a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief
your only Son was lifted up
that he might draw the whole world to himself.
May we walk this day in the way of the cross
and always be ready to share its weight,
declaring your love for all the world.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Blessed be God forever.

The last word

We know it was a Friday afternoon. The day before the Sabbath. The scene, just outside the gates of Jerusalem.

What follows is not of itself anything out of the ordinary: three men are executed by crucifixion; two are criminals, one is a rabbi from Galilee.

Jesus's death didn't take long. Crucifixion could go on for days. But already severely beaten, Jesus dies after a matter of hours.

In Mark's Gospel we are told that at noon there was darkness over the land for three hours, and at three o'clock the dying man cried out with a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabacthani?*" which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

These are his last words.

Some bystanders hear him and say, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah". One of them fetches a sponge filled with sour wine, puts it on a stick, and gives it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down". Then Jesus gives another loud cry and breathes his last.

This morning we will look in painful detail at these last words. We will hear Jesus crying out. We will stay with these awful words. We will examine them. We will acknowledge their difficulty.

If Jesus finds God absent at the point of death, what hope is there for the rest of us?

POEM: Eloi, Eloi - Mike Tulloch

In strange, exotic words I do not know
you speak of painful things I know too well;
of separation, ever left bereft,
of love forsaken and the grasp of hell.

And it's only fleeting consolation
to find these words embedded in the psalms,
giving meaning to contorted passion,
through the twister's eye a final calm.

God was on the wood that awful Friday
crying out, misunderstood again;
drowning in the depths of our exhaustion,
trouncing pain within the depths of pain.

Twisted thorn and sacred wood and iron,
where life lost, there life has been regained.

HYMN: When I survey the wondrous cross

READING: Psalm 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?
My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.
Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the one Israel praises.
In you our ancestors put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.
To you they cried out and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.
But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.
All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.
"He trusts in the Lord," they say,
"let the Lord rescue him."
Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him."

Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.
From birth I was cast on you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.
Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.
Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.
Roaring lions that tear their prey
open their mouths wide against me.
I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted within me.
My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.
Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.
All my bones are on display;
people stare and gloat over me.
They divide my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment.
But you, Lord, do not be far from me.
You are my strength; come quickly to help me.
Deliver me from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dogs.
Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.
I will declare your name to my people;
in the assembly I will praise you.
You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
For he has not despised or scorned
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.
From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;
before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows.
The poor will eat and be satisfied;
those who seek the Lord will praise him—
may your hearts live forever!
All the ends of the earth
will remember and turn to the Lord,
and all the families of the nations
will bow down before him,
for dominion belongs to the Lord

and he rules over the nations.
All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—
those who cannot keep themselves alive.
Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord.
They will proclaim his righteousness,
declaring to a people yet unborn:
He has done it!

Scripture on his lips

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is the opening line of Psalm 22. Jesus dies with the words of scripture on his lips. These are words Jesus may well have learned as a child: in the home and in the synagogue. They resourced him in this hour of most desperate need and agony.

When we read Psalm 22, it seems to be a commentary on the passion. It seems to be predicting what would happen on the cross, even some of its smallest details. Hence we find phrases like "you lay me in the dust of death" and, later on, "they pierce my hands and my feet".

What does this tell us? It tells us that Jesus loved the Psalms: that he knew the Psalms; that they are woven into his life of prayer. He probably knew many of them by heart.

It is good to say and sing the words that others have said. Like the football crowd singing "You'll Never Walk Alone", or at the rugby where the English sing "I looked over Jordan, what did I see?" They mean so much more than the words. They say "I belong", "I am here", "I am part of this".

The psalms do not shy away from darkness. They do not flinch from giving voice to the full range of human feeling. And they do it in the presence of God, directed to God, speaking to God, honouring God, but speaking to God *as we would speak to each other*. This is the reason that they are a way of praying and a library of prayer. When desolation, forsakenness, elation or torpor leave me not knowing what to say, the Psalms are there for me. They give words that speak to my situation, honed and hallowed by the countless other human voices that have also turned to them for solace.

When I have nothing to say. When prayer eludes me. When faith is hopelessly small. When life is wretched. When I face persecution and death itself, there are words available to me to give my longings voice and substance. They are the words of scripture. Words I can reach for. Words I may begin to teach myself, for it is never too late to learn a single phrase. It is a banquet I return to. An understanding that comes from standing under the cross. A kind of tune. It feeds my mind and my imagination. It opens my heart.

I am not left behind. I am not forgotten. Someone who has been forsaken like me - even godforsaken like me - and who knows what it feels like to be abandoned and alone, has come back for me. His words can be mine.

They were there for Jesus as he hung dying on the cross.

He turned to them.

They helped him pray. They gave him words.

Jesus found in this psalm words that both gave voice to his feelings and helped him through the hours of his passion. They can help us too.

READING: Mark 15: 33-39 - Alison Trehearn

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

Misunderstood

They didn't speak Aramaic. Or they didn't hear him correctly. Or they weren't really that interested. Whatever the reason, they didn't know or recognise these words. They had no idea what he was on about.

It is, in so many respects, one of the most painful details of the story. Jesus utters these monumental words, wrenched and wrung out from the heart of suffering - but no one understands him.

This is worse than being ignored. They don't just shrug their shoulders at their miscomprehension. They actually get him wrong. They mistranslate him. The bystanders hear the Aramaic word "Eloi" - "my Lord" - and think he's saying "Elijah". "Listen", they cry in Mark's Gospel, "he is calling for Elijah". And in Matthew's Gospel they go further, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him".

This is an additional indignity. Enjoying the spectacle of death, they peevishly speculate that there might be even more excitement to come. But they don't hear what he is really saying.

Isn't this the whole terrible tragedy of Jesus' ministry? Even at the last, even in his death, even as he utters his final words, he is misunderstood. People don't know him. People don't understand what he is saying. People get him wrong, even those who claim to know him best.

As we come to the cross and try to hear what Jesus is saying and what it means, we can't help notice that most of those who had been following him and who promised they would endure with him to the end have fled. This is the painful trajectory of the story: one by one, those who thought they knew him find out they don't. They misunderstand him. They abandon him. Either wilfully or unwittingly, they get his words wrong.

Isn't this also true for us? Jesus dies, as he lived, with people not getting him. His words are mis-heard and misunderstood, and, sadly, this has not changed much. Wilfully, mistakenly, foolishly or purposefully, because of cowardice and neglect, we get Jesus wrong.

We hear what we want to hear. We do what we want to do. We pray for what we want to get.

We get faith wrong. We think of it as a ticket to heaven rather than a blueprint for life. We are timid, when we should be bold; polite, when we should be filled with righteous anger; focused on ourselves, when we should be focused on God and upon God's kingdom.

We pick and choose. We sift and edit. We discard the uncomfortable bits of Christian faith; and especially the cross and the discomfort of Jesus' wretched forsakenness.

We make the Christian faith fit. Or wait for a miracle. Perhaps still thinking that Elijah might come and take him down, and give us a different story and a different God.

This might be the nub of it: we don't change ourselves, we want God to change. If only God were a bit more like us. "*Thy will be done*" gradually becomes "*my will be done*".

Isn't this the terrible startling truth of it? God is like us because God has become *forsaken like us*. It's just that we have shut ourselves away from this forsakenness, especially in a society like ours, where, even with Covid, we are able to pretend that we might live for ever. We don't talk about death and dying very much. We've lost the rituals and customs that helped us through bereavement. We even view talk about age and ageing as if it is some sort of failure. We certainly do all that we can to remain youthful for as long as possible and to hide, disguise or even surgically remove the effects of ageing. None of this is necessarily wrong, but it can be dangerous and prevent us from facing the ultimate reality of our living: that is, that we will die.

And isn't this why Jesus died? Because that is what human beings do - we die. *And Jesus has become a messiah who is completely human. Because we couldn't save ourselves.* Because we get things wrong. Because we cherish the illusion that death might leave us alone.

It is this salvation, wrought in the very heart of how and where we get it wrong, that is the central meaning of the Christian faith: that Jesus came to save sinners - that is, forsaken people - including those who don't know they're forsaken and who pretend otherwise, and who have avoided thinking about the loneliness of death. In Christ, God is making it right for those who get it wrong.

That's what we hear on the cross as Jesus cries out, "Why have you abandoned me?" It is a discovery of how little we know; a timely encounter with our lack of understanding: face to face in the face of Jesus as he dies. It is the unmasking of illusion. A liberating shot of reality.

HYMN: My song is love unknown

Terrifying

We recoil from them. They challenge our understanding of Jesus and they challenge our understanding of the cross. They stir the pot of our darkest anxieties. They correspond too closely to our own experience of sometimes feeling abandoned by God in times of deep need or isolating pain. We shudder with dread.

If this was Jesus' experience, how can we call the cross a victory? How can it be the source of salvation? How - and this is the really chilling conclusion - amid all the ongoing horrors and the colossal pain in the world, can the cross be anything other than a brutal

reaffirmation that it is a cruel and ugly place, that the innocent suffer, and that God, if God does exist, has either lost control or doesn't care?

That is because we really want a different sort of Jesus. Not one that suffers. Not one who is agonisingly human. This Jesus is too like the despairing person we are ourselves.

We like him when he is casting out demons and blessing small children. We like him when he is healing the sick. We like him when he rebukes the powerful and tells his beautiful stories. But we are nervous and uncertain when we find Jesus saying the very things we say; when we hear him cry out to God in the same anguish and abandonment we know so well.

The words "*lema sabachthani*" mean "Why have you left me alone?" That is the overcasting horror of them. Crucifixion, we know, is a most horrifying, drawn-out and painful way to die. Jesus is in immense physical pain. We know this. It is ghastly enough. But now it seems he is in spiritual torment as well. *Lema sabachthani* is the agonised cry of one who has been abandoned; one who has been deserted by the one they love and the one they thought loved them. The pain is not just the pain of isolation. It is much, much worse. It is the pain of being left alone. The one I love and need was with me. Now they have gone. I thought they loved me. I thought this love was forever. Now it is just me. Love itself has left me behind. That is how it was for Jesus.

Hearing anyone say such words is painful, but to hear them on the lips of Jesus is impossibly so. The one who has left Jesus behind is God the Father. God has the power to stay with Jesus, but God has chosen not to.

Nowadays, many people are turned away from the Christian faith because they either don't understand why it is that Jesus had to suffer and die. It seems to make God a rather cruel and vindictive father. Or they cannot love a God who calls himself love yet appears to permit such terrible suffering in the world, and here even in his own Son. Certainly, the weight of evidence seems to be against God.

There is so much suffering in our world. So much that is wrong. Millions starve. Children are without fresh water. Rainforests disappear. Ancient ways of life disappear. An earthquake erupts and thousands die. Sea levels rise. Forest fires rage. Tanks cross borders. Desperate people flee for their lives. Racial intolerance festers. Lack of resources for education and health, poor and inadequate housing, wilfully stunted ambition mean whole generations and whole communities feel left behind, forsaken.

Where is God? we say. If God is as God says he is, why doesn't he intervene? If Jesus has the power that we have seen demonstrated elsewhere in the story, why doesn't he save himself?

However much we try to explain these words away, shouldn't we also face the horror that maybe at the last, in those final agonising moments, Jesus himself stopped believing in God, stopped reckoning himself the Messiah, was utterly defeated and abandoned. Isn't this what the words actually mean?

Or is it?

Is there something else?

MUSIC: Seven Last Words from the Cross/James MacMillan

Darkness over the land

Jesus' words come from the heart of darkness and are spoken into a world of darkness. They are dark words. They take us to the heart of our own darkness and despair. They plumb the depths of darkness, or as the Apostles' Creed puts it, explaining the deepest, darkest meaning of Jesus' death: "He descended into hell".

He cries out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The crowds misunderstand him as usual. Most of his followers have fled. But after the crowds wait to see if Elijah will come and save him, Mark tells us that Jesus gave *another loud cry* and then breathed his last.

There are no words this time. Just a cry. Just, we suppose, a howl of sorrow and of pain. Then he dies.

The darkness persists. It seems as if it has triumphed.

Then Mark says this: "The curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" and that "when the centurion, who stood facing him saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's son!'".

St Mark's Gospel Jesus is, at first, a secretive figure, a man of action who commands silence from those he heals. The secret that Mark's Gospel reveals is not that Jesus is the Messiah, but the *nature of his messiahship*: Mark tells us that Jesus is a Messiah who must suffer and die.

Those who followed Jesus found this message difficult to swallow.

Judas maybe betrays Jesus because he can't understand this intellectually. He wanted Jesus to bring in the kingdom.

Peter denies Jesus because he can't understand this emotionally. He liked walking on water. He wasn't so good at sinking.

James and John simply argue about who is the greatest and who will have the best seats when Jesus establishes his kingdom.

Only the centurion standing at the foot of the cross recognises what is happening, that the death of Jesus itself. not his teaching, not his miracles, *but his dying* is the manifestation of God's love and the sure sign of God's passionate commitment to the world. "Truly," he says, "this man was God's Son!"

The centurion's confession of faith in Jesus as *Son of God* comes about not just in stark contrast to the failings of virtually everyone else in the story, but on the basis of Jesus' death alone; and nothing else. It also leaves us with the question: is Jesus *the* Son of God? In which case how do we make sense of his suffering, his feeling abandoned by God, and his death? Or is he *a son of God*, a supremely wonderful, holy and inspiring person, but no more than that, and in the end, abandoned to death like the rest of us?

Paradoxically, to answer this, we are going to have to go deeper still into the words themselves; not just what they meant for Jesus *but what they meant for God*.

As Christians, we believe in God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, what we call the Trinity. God is *three* persons, and *one* God.

Repeatedly in John's Gospel, Jesus insists that he and the Father are one. Yet in the events of Holy Week this "at-one-ness" is stretched to breaking point. Jesus' desperate

and one romantic fiction.
Boy meets girl, and children, always children,
play on endless loop and constitute
the vital repetitions of history.

Then one romantic fact.

Also young and
vital. Cast outside the city walls where
Sheol's replenishing waste chokes and smoulders,
where everyone ends up forsaken.
Puts a marker on the ground and says, no more,
so those who weep and wait and do not cling
may have something to hold on to.

A final story.

It is about a little girl who is late to come home from school one day. Five minutes go by. Ten minutes go by. Her mother is worried sick. The little girl should have been home by now. Fifteen minutes go by. Twenty minutes go by. The mother anxiously paces up and down, fearing something terrible has happened. Twenty-five minutes go by, and just as the mother is on the verge of phoning the police, the little girl waltzes in through the back door, right as rain.

The mother sweeps her up in her arms, so relieved she is safe. But relief turns to anger: "Where have you been?" says the mother. "Didn't you know how worried I would be?"

"Well," says the little girl, "I was coming home from school, and I passed a woman carrying an enormous, beautiful vase. As I passed her, she tripped on a paving stone. The vase fell from her hands and broke into a thousand pieces."

"Oh," says the mother, "is that why you're late? Did you stop to help her pick up the pieces?"

"No," replies the little girl, "I stopped to help her cry".

HYMN: Praise to the holiest in the height

Closing Prayer

Blessed are you, Lord God of our salvation,
to you be praise and glory for ever.
As a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief
your only Son was lifted up
that he might draw the whole world to himself.
May we walk this day in the way of the cross
and always be ready to share its weight,
declaring your love for all the world.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Blessed be God forever

AMEN