“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Has there ever been a more honest prayer? Not more eloquent, more pious, more beautiful, more uplifting. There are many of those. But none *more* honest, nor more universal.

A person who has never darkened the door of any house of worship, nor professed any belief at all could recognize this prayer and make it their own, even if it meant adapting the wording to something like, “Why is the universe so indifferent to my suffering; why am I so alone?”

For our Lenten study this year we read a rather unorthodox book on prayer. Its lack of orthodoxy seems to me one of its attractions. Well, how orthodox or pious was it for Jesus to make this psalm his own as he looked death squarely in the face? It was hardly what his apostles and friends and acquaintances and the merely curious expected from the Messiah: “God, why aren’t you here?”

Quoting the psalm came naturally to Jesus, a child of the faith which produced it. This outcry is one of his most momentous utterances. It is recorded in two of the four gospels, including Mark, the oldest, which we read on Sunday.

There is so much in these nine words, and especially there is proof of Jesus’ full humanity, including human limitations. There is no wink or nudge here to imply that he knows this is a mere bump in the road. No divine peek around the corner. This is a thirty-something year-old man who has suffered horribly and unjustly and knows he is reaching the end of his life. According to Matthew and Mark these are, literally, his last words.

Thank you, thank you, God, I say, for not allowing this to be prettied up. These words validate our fears and feelings of abandonment. They remind us that even in our darkest hours we never go anywhere our Lord has not been. And he went there, not in some pantomime of a human being, but fully, completely, just as one of us.

There can be no true appreciation of Easter, our Easter faith, without our full, unstinting acceptance of the Good Friday reality. Even that phrasing, “Good Friday reality” reeks of euphemism. What I mean to say is that our faith requires us to sit with the stark, cruel execution of an innocent man. He is, of course, the god-man who embodies the essence of God, but still a man who suffers when tortured and ridiculed and who feels abandoned by God at the moment of his death.

An apt conclusion to this reflection comes from St. Melito, the second-century Bishop of Sardis, part of what we know as Turkey today. I’d never heard of him, that I remember, before coming across a website called “Lent and Beyond: An Anglican Prayer Blog.” The title of his Holy Week sermon, written less than 150 years after the crucifixion is “God has been murdered.”

Holy Week remembers the Passion of Jesus Christ Crucified  
This is the one who patiently endured many things in many people:  
This is the one who was murdered in Abel, and bound as a sacrifice in Isaac,  
and exiled in Jacob, and sold in Joseph,  
and exposed in Moses, and sacrificed in the lamb,  
and hunted down in David, and dishonored in the prophets.

This is the one who became human in a virgin,  
who was hanged on the tree, who was buried in the earth,  
who was resurrected from among the dead,  
and who raised mankind up out of the grave below to the heights of heaven.

The one who hung the earth in space, is himself hanged;  
the one who fixed the heavens in place, is himself impaled;  
the one who firmly fixed all things, is himself firmly fixed to the tree.  
The Lord is insulted, God has been murdered,  
the King of Israel has been destroyed by the right hand of Israel.

This is the lamb that was slain. This is the lamb that was silent.  
This is the one who was taken from the flock, and was dragged to sacrifice,  
and was killed in the evening, and was buried at night;  
the one who was not broken while on the tree,  
who did not see dissolution while in the earth.  
who rose up from the dead, and who raised up mankind from the grave below.

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