

A background image of a total solar eclipse, showing the sun's corona as a bright white ring around a dark, circular sun.

Invitation to empathy

'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me'

Week 6

On 5 August 2010 a single block of rock weighing 770,000 tons smashed through the layers of the San Jose copper and gold mine trapping 33 miners 2,300 feet underground and three miles from the mine's entrance. 17 days after the collapse, a drill reached the place where the miners were thought to be and a note was sent up to the surface. The message read: 'We are fine in the shelter, the 33 of us.' On Tuesday 12 October 2010 after having been underground for over 60 days, Jimmy Sanchez who was 19 at the time and the youngest of the miners wrote a note stating: 'There are actually 34 of us... because God has never left us down here.' Somehow in the dust and darkness, somehow in the depths of the earth and the depths of despair this young Chilean man found God was present with them, before he was rescued. Sanchez realised that Christians have a God who not only empathises with our pain but stands with us.

Introduction

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' is a cry of desolation. It's a quote from one of David's psalms, which seems to describe the crucifixion with uncanny accuracy: the ridicule and insults, his heart melting like wax, his thirst and the gambling for his clothes, and the isolation and despair. Somehow, mysteriously, Jesus was forsaken by his Father so that we could be forgiven. He faced loneliness in its most extreme form so that we never have to. Here is the ultimate act of hospitality: Jesus was displaced from the presence of God so that we could be welcomed into it. Jesus suffered in solidarity with humanity in order to bring us back to God.

Prayer

Dear all-knowing God, thank you that you know us so completely. You know the words we are going to say before we even open our mouths. You know where we have been, what we have done, and all the days marked before us. You know each and every hair on our head. Thank you that you understand us when no one else seems to. Amen.

Setting the scene

Jesus knew what was ahead of him on the cross. He understood God's will for his life and the extent of the need around him in the world. He understood the Old Testament theme of sacrifice and was familiar with the prophecies about the details of the cross. He knew from the beginning of time that it was always part of the plan that he would carry the sins of the world. This was something he predicted numerous times in his own teaching, along with the resurrection.

But knowing that something will happen in the future, is not the same as experiencing it in the present. We see Jesus questioning God in our reading today, even though he fully understood God's will.

Mark 15.33–36

At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?').

Focus

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Jesus is quoting Psalm 22, which sees King David facing serious troubles. David's cry of desperation is framed by incredible levels of detail, which almost perfectly describe the experience of crucifixion that Jesus was going to face. David even records a description of the mockery and insults that includes the taunt whether God will intervene and rescue him.

This seems to mirror exactly what happened to Jesus as the crowds, the religious authorities, the Roman soldiers and even one of the criminals dying next to Him mocked Him for being 'unable' to save Himself.

David also records his own physical experience :

'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.'

This acts as an uncanny description of crucifixion as bones and joints are pulled out of place, the heart is put under immense pressure, and there is a desperate sensation of thirst as the victim experiences asphyxiation as death approaches.

Finally, David records the shame and humiliation of his experience – which include the piercing of hands and feet, the contortion of the naked body to show the bones, the crowds staring and gloating, and bargaining over the victim's clothes.

Again, these descriptions match the physical experience of crucifixion where nails were driven through Jesus' hands and feet, and the crowds jeer as he dies, thirsty, naked and broken. Even this little insight of his clothes being gambled over is a perfect match for Jesus' experience, even though this psalm was written hundreds of years before his birth. David has described Jesus' crucifixion with uncanny accuracy.

But Jesus' use of the introduction to Psalm 22 also expresses a much deeper, more agonising and more heartfelt despair at the isolation that he was experiencing as he, God the Son, was alienated from God the Father. Somehow, in some profound and mysterious way, the triune God was disrupted by the cross. The consequence of Jesus carrying the crushing weight of the world's sins on his shoulders was that he and his Father were estranged. Jesus was forsaken by his Father so that we could be forgiven. He was rejected so that we could be accepted. He was estranged so that we could be adopted. He was excluded from the mercy of God so that we could be included. He was extradited so that we could be invited. Here is the ultimate act of hospitality – that Jesus would feel utterly abandoned by his Father, so that we could be fully welcomed.

These words from the cross invite us to empathise with Jesus in his pain. But in a far more profound way, it is Jesus who is empathising with us in our pain. Because of Jesus' empathy towards us, we are invited to experience forgiveness, which we accept with deep gratitude and worship. Because of Jesus' empathy towards us, we are invited to follow his example, empathising with others in times of physical, emotional and spiritual distress.

Personal reflection questions

1. When have you felt closest to God? What were the circumstances?
2. Have you ever felt abandoned by God? What were the circumstances that made you feel this way? Did you tell God how you were feeling?
3. Why do you think Jesus offered a cry of desolation from the cross?
4. How could you offer hope and comfort to someone who tells you: 'There has been so much suffering in my life I don't believe God really cares anymore.'
5. Try to list all the ways that Jesus suffered on the cross – which ones can you relate to? How do they help you in your relationship with him?
6. Everyone found acceptance from Jesus. How approachable are you to other people – especially those who are suffering? What could you do to become more empathetic towards other people's needs?

Final thoughts

Jesus is the great go-between. He enters our world and draws alongside us. He understands us, and he identifies with our suffering.

When we are troubled, Jesus invites us to the cross where he reminds us that he too was troubled, and that because of his suffering we can be saved.

When others are troubled, Jesus invites us to follow in his footsteps and empathise with those in need even though it may cost us dearly. Throughout the ages Christians have moved into difficult neighbourhoods, or have crossed continents, or have opened up their homes to live and work amongst the poor and needy. What does Jesus' willingness to suffer on our behalf inspire and invite you to do?

Closing prayer

Dear God, thank you for experiencing the pain of separation from your Son so that we could become your sons and daughters. Lord Jesus, thank you for enduring the cross and scorning its shame. Spirit of God, help us to empathise with those in need the way Jesus did, and to be willing to suffer that others might come to know the grace of our God. Amen.

Conclusion

Jesus' last word from the cross was 'it is finished': his work was complete. He had paid for the sins of the world so that he could invite all of us to be with him in paradise. He had suffered physical pain, spiritual isolation and yet still had made time to forgive his enemies and look after his mother. Even as he died Jesus modelled for us the holistic grace of God and invites us to experience all that he has accomplished for us. As we come to the end of our Lent reflections why not take a moment to think of all that God has taught you, and all that the cross of Jesus means to you?