

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11
MATTHEW 26:14-27:66

The Empathy of God

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

Matthew and Mark, unlike Luke and John, record only one brief utterance of Jesus while he was dying on the cross. It is not a word of forgiveness, or hope, a directive to a follower, a seemingly simply need, an affirmation of triumph, or of quiet faith. This “word” is rather a cry of utter desolation.

Some commentators have tried to soften the anguish of this cry by noting that with these words, Jesus is quoting Psalm 22:1, and implicitly referencing the entire psalm, which starts as a cry of desolation and ends with solid faith in God. Fine, but which of the psalm’s 30 verses does Jesus chose to quote? This one. Some commentators have acknowledged Jesus’ anguish but emphasized that a prayer of despair is still a prayer, which implies faith. True enough; but taken by itself, this prayer also sounds like the one saying it wonders if *anyone* is listening – or if there is a listener, *if* that listener cares?

Jesus by this time had suffered excruciating physical pain. He had been whipped, most likely with unusual enthusiasm by the Roman soldiers, who thought it was delicious to be torturing and executing someone Pontius Pilate convicted of claiming to be the King of the Jews.

Jesus then had been force-marched through the city of Jerusalem carrying the cross on which he would die, until even a burly carpenter like him could no longer bear it, so much blood had he already lost. When he and the gruesome procession climbed the hill of Calvary, he was nailed to the cross by his hands and feet, producing more extraordinary pain, while the ropes that actually held his body weight on the cross and the little shelf on which his heels could rest meant that he, like all crucified people, would be able to linger and die *slowly*, in agony, while still needing to be conscious in order to breathe by straightening their legs on their little shelves and so boosting their chests. The Romans liked the deaths of their victims to be as slow and painful as possible, so that people would take note and not try to mess with the Empire.

If *you* have ever suffered serious physical pain, *Jesus understands*. He’s been there. He can *empathize*. Not merely sympathize, as someone might who’s never been in agony. Empathize.

If you have a disability or chronic illness which you know will only be ended by your death, Jesus understands. He’s been there. He knew there was only one thing that would end his suffering. He can *empathize* with yours.

By this time, Jesus had been betrayed by a member of his inner circle, Judas Iscariot, for 30 pieces of silver. Most of his once many followers, except for one man

and a handful of women, had deserted him at the first sign of risk to themselves and were not at the cross. The one other disciple who hadn't gone AWOL denied that he even knew who Jesus was – and that was Peter, whose bravado at the Last Supper disappeared when it counted on Good Friday.

If you've ever been betrayed by someone you trusted, Jesus understands. He's been there. He can *empathize*.

If you've ever been deserted by so-called friends when you needed them most, Jesus understands. If, at your worst moment, you had brothers and sisters (as Jesus did) who couldn't even be bothered to send a card, Jesus understands. If your best friend denied even knowing you because it was risky, Jesus understands.

He's been there.

He can empathize with you.

If you've ever experienced severe anxiety and doubt, ahead of a trauma you foresaw, think of Jesus' anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus understands. He's been there.

If you are an oldest child who ever wondered about who would take care of your widowed mother if you weren't around, Jesus faced that, too.

Jesus understands. He's been there.

If you've ever wondered if a project you've spent three years on, or your whole career, or even your whole life, was worth it, Jesus understands. He's been there. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

If you've ever watched your child die, God the Father Almighty understands. He's been *there*. The Father was listening to Jesus say, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" while knowing even the Almighty had to do *nothing* except listen and watch, in anguish, if the plan of salvation were to be carried out.

For the plan of salvation involved one of the three eternal persons of the Holy Trinity, God the Son, to become incarnate as a human being to be God among God's people that they might be loved, taught, forgiven and raised up by God **in person**. And to do that, God the Son's complete humanity included complete vulnerability – physical, emotional and, yes, spiritual.

For God the Son to experience and therefore be able to understand and empathize with human beings in their times of pain and anguish of all different sorts, he had to experience many of those pains fully *himself: including* the sense of spiritual desolation people feel when they feel like God has forsaken them.

And in Jesus' case, perhaps, if only briefly, he really had.

That indescribable, boundless and eternal unity of the Holy Trinity went into eclipse Good Friday afternoon so that Jesus could experience for real what people sometimes feel. Only so could we be able to say God *does* understand when we might feel at the end of our ropes, in the pit of despair, in spiritual anguish, utterly alone.

If any of us ever cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” in our time of agony, we know that Jesus spoke those words, too. Jesus understands us. He’s been there. He can empathize with us.

God is not someone who observes us through binoculars in “the owner’s box” high above the 50 yard line while we suffer in mud and sleet on the playing field. God came down to join us, to experience our pain and sorrow, our disappointments, our anguish. God understands. God’s been **here**.

Jesus Christ is Emmanuel: “**God with us.**”

Easter started in a borrowed tomb guarded by soldiers of an occupying army after the one buried had suffered betrayal, torture, humiliation, desertion, and utter spiritual desolation. That was what Jesus went through. Then Easter happened.

As we journey through Holy Week towards Easter, let us remember that wherever *we* are or might sometime find ourselves, God understands and empathizes with our pains, whatever they might be. And *wherever we might be*, God can invite us to experience new life at Easter, both right now, and forever.

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