



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

Archbishop Stephen led the Service for Good Friday on BBC Radio 4. His reflection follows in full...

The words, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' are... well, the only word I can think to describe them is terrifying.

This isn't what we want to hear from Jesus. These are our words, the words we fear we might be saying with our last breath, when what we want - from Jesus and for ourselves - is comfort, reassurance.

Can it be that Jesus died, confronting the absence of God, feeling forsaken, even godforsaken?

And even discovering that these words are the opening line of Psalm, 22, and even acknowledging that Psalm 22 is, it appears, a profound meditation on the meaning of the passion, doesn't really help. It doesn't get round the plain meaning of the words. The pill is sugared, but the bitterness beneath remains.

Moreover, as Mark and Matthew record the words in the actual Aramaic that Jesus spoke, only emphasise the fact that these really were the words Jesus said, so terrible and so memorable that the gospel writers can't even bring themselves to translate to them.

And to pile tragedy upon tragedy, what follows is in its own way, just as desperate.

The bystanders enjoying the spectacle of a good execution, don't understand Aramaic and think he is calling upon Elijah.

As he dies, so as he lives, Jesus is misunderstood.

And here for us might be the life giving kernel of the seed that has to fall into the ground and die before it grows and bears fruit: we too misunderstand.

Jesus is crying out in agony. He is confronting the full horror and finality of death. He does experience the same estrangement from God and alienation that we experience. He is absolutely plumbing the depths of what it is to be human, of the consequences of our sinfulness, even death itself.

And that popular hymn about the passion, which says at this point, 'The Father looks away', has got it wrong. Because the best way of understanding the horror and the mystery of the cross, is that this point, the point of Jesus' death, is the point at which the Father and the Son are by the power of the Holy Spirit deeply united in this act of complete estrangement. Jesus, who is fully human, fully sharing what it is to be human, taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb, and only then completely, and for us so very surprisingly, raised to life is in this moment of his death sharing our forsakenness, so that we are found at last.

The curtain in the temple is torn in two. The barriers of separation are rent asunder. By a separation. By a God who makes space for us. By a God who shares God's life with us. By a love which reaches into death and separation itself. Even, as the creeds put it, into the depths of hell: to unite our life with the life of God, so that we might be raised as well.



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