

Palm Sunday

You feel abandoned whenever someone you expected to be close is not. As Jesus approached death, the words he shouted related not to the physical suffering of nails biting flesh, but to the emotional suffering of abandonment. Physical suffering is awful, but abandonment by someone who should love you can feel worse, especially if you don't know why. From the cross in both Mark's and Matthew's account of the Passion, Jesus quotes the first line of Psalm 22, which we mournfully sang today, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" He calls upon God twice, as you might do incredulous that a rock in your life has disappeared.

The complete Psalm 22 bemoans a litany of troubles afflicting the person who sings it: scorned by everyone; wasted to skin and bones; surrounded by dogs, bulls and a lion; beset by a band of the wicked; endangered by the sword; laid in the dust of death. As a result the person feels like a worm and not even human, like water poured out upon the ground, possessing a heart like melted wax, a parched throat, mutilated hands and feet, and nakedness before enemies. Psalm 22 presents a terrifying picture of suffering. But then it turns on a dime. It promises God, "I will tell of your name to my kin, and praise you in the midst of the assembly." Somehow this person got out of it, and finished a song of complaint with a hymn of thanksgiving.

Several verses of this psalm reappear in the Passion: bystanders deride Jesus, they ridicule his faith in the Father, they tear holes in his hands and feet, they divide his garments by casting lots to see what each should take. When Jesus prayed it from the cross, he forever changed its interpretation for us. Psalm 22 prophesied his suffering. Suffering may feel unjust, but it should never be unexpected. Physical suffering and emotional abandonment are part of the human experience.

When we suffer any distress - physical, social, mental, emotional or spiritual - we spontaneously pray. We pray more when we're in trouble than when life is going well. A beautiful paradox arises from the prayer Jesus offers: he complains that God has abandoned him, but he complains about it to God. If God were really absent, what was the point of praying? So too when we are beset by evils too many to count, when we behold the suffering of starving children, students frightened by guns, and citizens terrorized by a serial bomber, we may wonder, "Where is God?" But as soon as we turn that phrase to, "Where are you, God?" it becomes a declaration of faith. It is the first step on the journey of Psalm 22 that ends by giving praise to God who gives us rescue, even from death.

Sunday, March 25, 2018