

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

“My God, why have you abandoned me?” is one of the most memorable cries Jesus made from the cross. Both Matthew and Mark record him saying these words, although not John, nor Luke, whom we heard today. Perhaps Luke wanted to focus on other matters, such as the forgiveness of a criminal crucified with Jesus, to show the extent of his mercy, even to the end. Only Luke records that conversation. The other gospels do not.

Still, the cry of Jesus in his agony rings off the pages of the bible, stirs our emotion, and confronts us with his humanity. Yes, he predicted his death and resurrection, so his crucifixion should not have come as a complete surprise. But in that moment of terror, who wouldn't cry out in agony?

As today's responsorial reminds us, Jesus' words, “My God, why have you abandoned me?” come from the opening of Psalm 22. Our cantor sang several verses detailing why the person who composed that psalm felt that way: “Dogs have surrounded me; a band of the wicked besets me. They tear holes in my hands and my feet; I can count every one of my bones.” Those images, real as they were for a person who lived centuries before Jesus, foreshadow the events of his crucifixion, down to the nail holes torn into his extremities.

But Psalm 22 does not end in despair. The same person who feels abandoned firmly believes that somehow they'll get out of this mess. These verses come from the more hopeful second half of the psalm: “I will tell of your name to my kin, and praise you in the midst of the assembly. ‘You who fear the Lord, give him praise; all descendants of Jacob, give him glory; revere him, all you descendants of Israel.’”

Jesus knew the entire psalm and probably recited it all from memory while on the cross, even though Matthew and Mark record only its opening words. Those words tell us about Jesus' prayer habits. He knew the psalms so well he could pick out a verse for any situation. Not many of us have that skill. We may say devotional prayers or spontaneous prayers, but we do not always make biblical prayers the foundation of our spiritual life as much as we could.

As we enter this Holy Week, we would all do well to take some time for personal prayer with the bible, meditating on some of its words so deeply that they become part of us. The bible gives us the best words to say especially in those moments of torment when we can't explain why something is happening and wonder in our humanity if God has abandoned us too.