

Sermon “Forsaken”

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, on March 29, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In ‘The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway’, first published in 1899, there is this story, a joke really, popular in Spain, about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of El Liberal newspaper which reads, “Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana, noon, Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.” The name Paco is a popular Spanish name—short for Fransisco. Hemingway went on to write that a squadron of Civil Guards had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement. Hemingway used this story as an intro to another, this time a not-so-short story about another Paco, who, I quote “had no father to forgive him, nor anything for the father to forgive.”

The Paco story is picked up by Philip Yancey, and appears in his book ‘What So Amazing About Grace’, published in 1998, 99 years after Hemingway. Yancey used it as a sort-of a mirror to Hemingway, who grew up in a very devout Christian family, yet had not truly experienced the grace of Christ. Hemingway lived a libertine life that most of us would call ‘dissolute’...but there was no father, no parent waiting for him, and he sank into the mire of graceless depression.

Since then, the original Paco story has become mainstream, used mostly as a sermon illustration about forgiveness, about reconciliation between a father and a son, and about our relationship to our Father in heaven. A quick Google search using the word ‘sermon’ and ‘Paco’, you will find pages upon pages of this story, sometimes with a slightly different viewpoint, or a different way of telling essentially the same story.

Look, I get it. It’s a compelling story, short and effective, and I had used it once, in an earlier sermon I preached. In a world that is quite unforgiving, a world full of broken relationships, I get why so many preachers like to use this story. It’s a story that illustrates well the love of God the Father, who is ever so forgiving, and ever so ready to seek out the wayward son. The Loving Father, whose arms are always open wide, ready to receive and reconcile. The Everlasting God who is ever faithful, who is

never forgetful, and when push comes to shove, the God who is ever present and never forsake.

I think that is why I find the death of Jesus troubling, his manner of death on the cross gut-wrenching, and his last utterance before death, devastating, as recounted in Mark 15:34, “At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” **My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**

The last words of Jesus are reported differently in the four Gospel. Luke reports Jesus’ last words as “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”, a reference to Psalm 31:5, a confident utterance of a Jewish evening prayer. In Luke’s Gospel, disciples do not flee from the cross, for Jesus, as viewed by Luke, did not die ‘forsaken by God’, but died as an exemplary martyr.

In John, we see a different theology at work, as we read in 19:30: “It is finished”. For John, the struggle of Jesus ends not in defeat but in victory and glorification on the cross.

Matthew comes close to Mark, reporting the same last words. But Matthew added two curious verses afterwards, describing the opening of tombs of fallen saints, and their bodies raised from the dead. It is as if the author was so eager to get to the good part, he did not linger in the death of Jesus, and jumped prematurely to the resurrection.

But here in Mark, the oldest, the most original tradition, these last words of Jesus are stark, they force us to confront the profound horror of his death on the cross, as the dying Jesus cried out, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**”

The death of Jesus was unique, unlike any other. Jurgen Moltmann in ‘The Crucified God’ made precisely such a compelling argument. According to Moltmann, Socrates died as a wise man. Cheerfully and calmly he drank the cup of hemlock, as a demonstration of the immortality of the soul. To him, death was a breakthrough to a higher, purer life. His death was a festival of liberty.

The Zealot martyrs, those who were crucified after unsuccessful revolts against Rome, died for their righteous cause, the cause of the righteousness of God. They died while cursing their enemies, conscious of their righteousness before God, and looked forward to their resurrection to eternal life.

The dispassionate men of the Stoics died with their inner liberty and their superiority intact, in arenas where they were torn to pieces by wild animals. They died without fear and, one could say, without hope, in full view of their fearful overlords and horrified crowds, while demonstrating their complete lack of terror even at their own death.

The Christian martyrs, too many to count, went also calmly in faith to their death. They died knowing they are united with the crucified Christ through this baptism of blood, and as such are also united in resurrection and glorification with Christ. The last words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when he went to the place of execution in Flossenburg extermination camp were: “This is the end—for me the beginning of life.”

Yet, Jesus clearly died a different way—his was not a fine death. He was ‘greatly distressed and trouble’, and his soul was ‘deeply grieved, even to death’ (Mark 14:33-34). He died while giving a loud incoherent cry as he breathed his last (Mark 15:37), or as the author of Hebrews saw it, ‘with loud cries and tears’ (Hebrews 5:7). The most troubling aspect of his horrible death, was his perceived forsakenness by God the Father, as Jesus, while hanging on the cross, cried out, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**”

Some interpreters have connected these words to that of Psalm 22, as in the opening two verses,

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night but find no rest.”*

Psalm 22 is a complex psalm, written by David, given to the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn (metaphorically speaking: the morning light). It starts as an individual lament, agonizing over the silence of God. It is followed by prayer, earnestly petition God for mercy. It then morphs into a psalm of thanksgiving of God’s faithfulness and past deliverance. It concludes with a communal praise for God’s future deliverance to ‘a people yet unborn’. Although Psalm 22 as a whole most likely had a formative influence on the Christian passion narratives, it does not quite fit as a historical reality of the death of Jesus. It is hard to imagine that at the point of his death, Jesus had in mind Psalm 22, as he uttered his last breath.

Some interpreters taken a different track, and have called out the mental state of Jesus while on the cross, pointing to the possibility that he 'suffered a collapse'. While that line of interpretation is not too hard to imagine, I mean 'who wouldn't?' However, it is too psychological in its approach, and lacks serious theological consideration to the real likelihood that God the Father did forsake Jesus on the cross.

One cannot, should not, take lightly this rejection of God the Father, given how closely Jesus had identified himself with God, as he said so in John 10:30, "The Father and I are one", or as in John 14:10, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me". This close identification with the God, and the mutual in-dwelling with the Father is what drives the ministry of Jesus, his preaching, the cause for which he lived and worked. Everything Jesus does and who he is spring forth from it. Even his love, 'as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love (John 15:9).

That is what makes this realization so much harder to swallow. What happened on the cross, maybe something that took place between Jesus and his God, between the Father and his son.

Taking the words of Jesus at face value, God had forsaken him on the cross, and this silence and absence of God was utterly unbearable. It is the antithesis of the Trinity, the contradiction of good, the breaking down of faith, the inverse of hope, and the opposite of love.

I often wonder why we call this day, the Good Friday. It is not good, it is quite the opposite. If God can forsake his beloved and only begotten Son, then what hope is there for us? What hope is there for us to pray to God, to expect God to stand with the suffering humanity, What hope is there for us to expect deliverance from God?

Oh how wretched beings we are, doomed and forsaken just like Jesus on the cross. Who or what can deliver us from such misery?

Allow me to peek ahead a few days. Only by Jesus Christ and his resurrection on that glorious Easter Sunday. By that empty tomb can we say we are forsaken no more.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**