



ST BART'S

A MEDITATION by:

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“My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?”

A meditation preached on March 29, 2013

Good Friday: The Three Hour Service from 12 noon to 3 o'clock

Based on Mark 15:33-37

An ancient Roman journalist once gave an account of what he observed, long ago, while witnessing a number of crucifixions, all on a single hill. He noted the gruesome details of the tortures exacted on the poor men by the Empire, details with which we are all too familiar as Christians. Yet at the end of his account, he said that what was especially unsettling to him, besides all that pain, were “the screams of rage . . . the wild curses and the outbreaks of nameless despair of the unhappy victims.” The men suffered, yes, but what was worse for him was that they despaired. This is completely understandable given their lot, but it was no less disturbing. To be crucified was not only to be killed. It was to have one’s spirit broken, deflating the soul before killing the body. And for thousands upon thousands of Rome’s enemies, it worked.

But look at Jesus, our dear friend and teacher. He was brutalized and pierced and left to die, abandoned by his friends, scorned even by those who were crucified beside him. The world shrouded him in darkness. Yet from his lips Christ summons the strength not for curses, but for prayers. Prayers. He prays for forgiveness for the people who are killing him. He prays for God to take his spirit. He prays. Tortured, he prays. Dying, he prays. His spirit remains unbroken.

In this particular moment, we hear him offering one of his most haunting prayers of all, his last words in Mark’s Gospel. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Can you hear the heartbroken pleading in this? The desperate cry for God to give an explanation for what is happening. For since his commitment in the Garden of Gethsemane, life has been a relentless assault. There has been little to show God to be acting on Jesus’ side. And so, even though he still turns to God in his time of trial, his guard is up now. This prayer is to “Eloi,” the God of the Psalms, in which so many righteous ones had flung their scoured and dying hearts to the heavens. This prayer from Christ is decidedly not to his “Abba,” or his “Poppa,” as were so many of his prayers before. The fondness has evaporated.

But hope hasn’t. It is still there under it all. In this cruel agony, he is not questioning God’s existence or power. He is questioning the silence of God. Such silence that to all eyes, looks like neglect. But he still summons his final words, searching for an answer, hoping for a revelation.

That answer will be revealed. But not today. Today, Christ makes his way, faithfully, through this time of pain and darkness, and with the words from the synagogue scrolls sputtering from his throat, with this “Why, Lord?” he dies.

The God of the Heavens alone, this Distant God that we thought we knew, the veiled, contained, clean, safe God, this God is dead. This God never was, really. God was always more than this. God has always been living and actual, not some free-floating abstraction. And God, in being God, in being real, lived among us, loved among us. And in Christ, in what we have seen this Good Friday, God knows what it is to lose everything. God knows what it is to suffer. God knows what it is to say, “Why me, Lord?” God knows what it is to be abandoned and alone. God knows what it is to question everything, even God’s very self. God knows what it is to die. In this, we witness God’s full-fledged knowledge of creation and humanity, God’s true omniscience.

And at Christ's last breath, the answer immediately begins to emerge, even before the Third Day. The veil of the Temple covering up God's so-called sanctuary was torn in two. A Roman pagan centurion can recognize that this is the death of God's Child. The Great Wall has been breached. That boundary, tended by so many as if their lives depended on it, that boundary between heaven and earth, human and divine, Jew and Gentile, sacred and profane, has been ripped apart. At least for us it has. The Great Wall was never really there. It has always been a mirage.

I'm grateful for what God did in Christ, all the benefits and wisdom that spring forth from his life and the life that outlasts even this death that we remember today. But, beside the good that God made out of this bad Friday, what we did to him was awful. And I wish it hadn't happened, and I think God would agree with me.

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