



## The Psalms

### Psalm 22 My God, my God

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*Isaiah 52: 13; 53: 3–end    Matthew 27: 45–54*

Those of you who know me or have seen me outside of these Chapel walls won't have failed to realise that I have two young children. Both of my children have been born here and my eldest, William, who is now three, took his first steps here, was baptised here, and spoke his first words here. Now, I wish I could tell you that William's first words were something profound or even vaguely religious, as would befit the firstborn of two priests, but the sad reality is that his first word was 'dat', which translated from toddler into normal English is 'fire alarm'.

Anyone who has ever lived within the College will know the joys of the weekly call point testing, the 7.00 am fire drills, and the full-scale evacuations that occur whenever someone so much as waves a piece of bread in the direction of a toaster. Whether you are a Fellow sipping tea in the Parlour, a student enjoying breakfast in the Hall, or a six-month-old baby warm in your bed, fire alarms are all part of our shared college experience.

As William proved with his first word, the language we use gives important insight into a person's background and formation. In the second of tonight's readings, Jesus gives us a glimpse into the culture in which he was formed when he utters, not his first, but his final words from the cross: 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me'.

The words themselves are deeply tragic: one can feel the anguish and agony of the scene, the suffering and the sorrow. 'Elowei, Elowei, lema sabachthani?: My God, My God, why have you forsaken me'. Yet while these words may sound like the dying lament of a man upon a cross, the words Jesus utters are not his own, but a recitation of the opening lines of psalm 22.

Psalm 22 is a cry for help from an unidentified voice. Some scholars suggest the psalm may have been composed by King David or Queen Esther, but the voice gives us no clear clue as to their true identity. In many ways this actually adds to the impact of the psalm as it encourages us – the hearers – to make the words our own, just as Jesus did on the cross. It is easy to make these words our own because we can all identify a point in our own lives where we too have cried out in the midst of despair and desertion; a time when we have felt abandoned by those closest to us, by society, by God. Psalm 22 helps us give voice to that pain and gives us the words to use when we have none.

The suffering endured by the psalmist is as varied as it is intense. The voice is mocked and despised, encircled on every side by those baying for blood; he cries out, he groans with a loud voice – and still no respite comes. This extreme suffering is a motif that features regularly throughout the Christian canon: we hear a similar tale of woe in the story of the suffering servant, our first reading this evening. We hear it too in the story of Job, which is set as our Anthem, and, of course, in the crucifixion. The bible as a whole contains within it the whole spectrum of human experience and so it is inevitable that sections of it – such as psalm 22 – will address the issue of human pain and suffering. The difference between the bible and other texts of course, is that suffering does not have the final word.

For twenty one verses the psalmist prays for deliverance from his afflictions and for 21 verses no respite comes. But then, suddenly, God responds. Immediately the mocking crowds are disbanded, the mouths of ravenous wolves are closed, and the psalmist's anguish turns to joy. 'O praise the Lord', says the Psalmist, 'the heaven's [have declared God's] righteousness.' From verse 22 onwards the psalm transforms into a hymn of praise, an extended thank you for the redemption that God has bestowed.

The contrast between part one and two of the psalm is profound: In the second half, the psalmist has endured his troubles, kept the faith, and now his salvation tastes all the sweeter because of the suffering and pain that we know has gone before. The key message of psalm 22 is, therefore, that no matter how alone we feel or how abandoned we might be, no matter how the evil-doers might encircle us, and how the wicked may lie in wait, God *has not* and *will not* forsake us. Salvation is always on the horizon and it is available to all who seek it.

If we understand Psalm 22 then as a study of contrast between suffering and salvation, it becomes clear why Jesus recited it on the cross. On the cross Jesus endured suffering and pain beyond that of most people's understanding. He had been scourged, abandoned and betrayed by those closest to him, and he was hung on a cross and left to die. However, despite his dire circumstances, he use his dying breath to recite the psalmists prayer to God: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'

In reciting these words Jesus both gives voice to his pain and anguish but also points forward to the redemption and resurrection that is to come. For just as psalm 22 contrasts the psalmists suffering with the story of his restoration, so the story of the crucifixion contrasts Jesus' tragic death with the account of his triumphant resurrection.

The point that I am trying to make here is not that we have to suffer in order to experience redemption or resurrection, but rather that Psalm 22 and the story of the crucifixion teaches us that there is no experience too dire or dreadful that can't be redeemed by God. Salvation is near to those who seek it and God is ever near to those who seek him.

Unfortunately though, and as Jesus discovered, while God may be near to those who suffer, that does not guarantee freedom from pain in this life. One of my favourite authors, Michael Mayne, sometime Vicar of Great St Mary's and Dean of Westminster Abbey, puts it perfectly in the book that he wrote while his body was being ravaged by cancer. He writes:

Jesus did not offer people perfect health and a painless death. Human minds and bodies are fragile and vulnerable. What he offers is eternal life: a new relationship with God of such a quality that nothing that may happen to us can destroy it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Mayne, *A Year Lost And Found*.

We, like the Psalmist, are able to experience God's transformative healing.

We, like Jesus, are able to experience God's salvific love.

But this transformation, this redemption, may not come at the precise moment we call for it. While we Christians can be confident that we have all been called into eternal life in Christ Jesus, we also have to be cognisant of the fact that this is to be a gift bestowed in God's time rather than ours. Our calling until that fateful day is thus 'to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear his most holy word, and to seek that our lives hereafter may be pure and holy; so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy.' [1662 *Book of Common Prayer*]

I spoke at the beginning about the fact that my son's first words were shaped by his worldly experiences, and while we can't go back in time and change our first words we can certainly ponder the ones that might leave our lips as we take our dying breath. Jesus used his final words to recite the psalmist's prayer for salvation. I wonder what your final words might be? Might they be a hymn of praise or a statement of faith? A declaration of love or a pronouncement of forgiveness?

Whatever they may be, it is worth pondering, for to misquote the old adage, the only thing certain in this life is death ... and fire alarms.