

GOOD FRIDAY SEVEN LAST WORDS

The First Word

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In our Lenten discussion group someone asked, *how can God forsake God? How can God feel forsaken?* I asked back, *have you ever forsaken yourself?*

Have you ever forsaken yourself? And who among us has not, at one time or another? Lost our moorings. Abandoned our principles. Let ourselves down in the worst, most shameful way. Who of us has not forsaken ourselves?

And what worse betrayal is there? Of all the disappointments, humiliations, treacheries, and terrors Jesus has suffered this week, of all the abandonments, this is perhaps the most excruciating.

He forsakes himself. He abandons himself. At least, that's how he feels. God has forsaken God.

What Jesus has forsaken, or been forsaken by, is not God, really. It's faith. His faith in God. His sense – rock-solid until now– his heartfelt conviction that God is his steadfast and constant companion, his loving parent, his sustenance.

What Jesus knows, for a moment, is the absence of God. And who among us has not known *that* absence?

He's quoting a psalm here, of course, the beginning of Psalm 22, the great song of lamentation and desolation. We might like to think that that alleviates the stark pain and terror of the moment. These are not Jesus' own words, not his own forsakenness, we might hope.

But to the contrary. Citing the psalm, Jesus draws on the deep well of sorrow and abandonment of the Hebrew people. He laments, in one breath, the thousands of years of punishment, oppression, exile. He gathers the whole of salvation history into one moment of ultimate loneliness, and his cry echoes down to us here, tonight, in this room, and gathers us up in its dark embrace.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The Third Word

"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

One of the thieves taunts Jesus, saying, if *you are the Christ, save yourself*. The other one says, righteously, improbably, *We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.*

Why does he say this? How can he possibly know what he's talking about? Crucifixion was the method of execution for dangerous criminals, enemies of the state. What does this reprobate know about the life and work of Jesus?

Maybe he believes the sign affixed above Jesus's head, *Jesus of Nazareth, The King of the Jews*. Perhaps he doesn't understand that that's a ridiculous title, meant to mock Jesus, to humiliate him further, if any *further* is to be imagined.

It sounds like a blatant bit of pandering. A bid for a get-out-of-hell-free card. Is the thief playing to the crowd? Is he appealing to Jesus for sympathy?

He doesn't ask to be saved. He only asks to be remembered.

But Jesus' response is immediate, and unequivocal. *Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*

Truly, I say to you. Pay attention. I mean this. This is real.

Today you will be with me in Paradise. Before this day is over, I will carry you with me to heaven, to the paradisaical Garden, God's home.

Why this instant and unqualified promise? We think of Jesus' response here as demonstration of his endless generosity and capacity to forgive, even *in extremis*. We are taught to understand this gesture as testimony to the triumph of faith over works – the thief's death-door confession, which saves him from the just consequence of his crimes.

But what if Jesus is simply lonely? What if he wants some company on the long dark journey from the cross to his next destination. One poor thief is not a lot to show for his mission on earth.

But it's not nothing. It's not nobody. It is, at least, one poor thief.

"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."