

Not Forsaken
(Ps. 22, Mk 15:21-41)

From the cross there was a heartrending cry. A heartrending cry that must have pierced the cacophony of sounds and the gloom enveloping the hill of Golgotha. From the cross, Jesus cried out in a loud voice and asked: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

It was a primal scream of despair and desolation. It was a searching interrogation at the borders of the abyss of meaninglessness. And it is a universal question posed by people of all faiths and by people of none. It is a question that haunts us even now. King David asked it. Job asked it. Women and men burnt at the stake as witches and heretics asked it. Soldiers lying maimed on the battlefields of the world asked it. Little children tormented by sadistic and psychopathic predators asked it.

It’s a question all human beings have asked of God at one point or another in their lives – sometimes at many points – either as suffering has gripped them personally, or as it has afflicted someone near and dear to them. It’s a question I’ve asked myself throughout my life; and it was a question thrust upon me on a picture postcard perfect day during the summer of 1995.

I was practising law and working at LAO on University Avenue. I had worked through my lunch in order to meet a deadline, and once the memorandum was finished and on its way to counsel, I took a break to go for a walk and pick up a bite of lunch. And so it was that I was standing at the corner of University and Armoury, across from the courthouse. The light was red. It was about 5 to 2, late for a lunch break, but even so, I was surprised by how quiet, almost empty, the sidewalk was. "Strange," I mused to myself, "there's usually been so many crowds around these past weeks, crowds who've come to gawk and condemn, to experience that strange thrill when one comes close to evil." There had been huge crowds at the courthouse that summer of '95. It was the summer of the trial of Paul Bernardo.

As I stood waiting for the red light to turn, two women came and stood beside me. I glanced towards them, as one does, and after a millisecond, I realized that I was standing beside the mothers of Kristen French and Leslie Mahaffey. Right beside me, so close that I could have touched them. They were standing there just like normal people, arm in arm, yet also expressionless. It was 26 or 27 degrees and bright and sunny, but I felt my blood run cold. "Change," I ordered the red light, "hurry up and change." But as I did so, I guiltily found myself

wondering if my companions were praying and hoping for the exact opposite.

“Stay red, stay red, so we can stay here all afternoon and never go back in there!”

Of course, the light changed. As we reached the other side, I slowed my pace a little and Mrs. French and Mrs. Mahaffey cut in front of me to walk back into the courthouse for another round of vicarious torture. I continued to walk south on University Avenue, my thoughts and feelings spiralling out of control, running the gamut from shock and empathic concern, to horror and fear – and to anger. As I stomped southwards – and I mean stomped – I was inwardly shaking my fist at the CN tower, the tallest, most powerful symbol within my range of vision. I was submerged, drowning in the numbing and wordless horror of those two young girls, who had been imprisoned for days in that house of darkness, knowing their impending fate and meanwhile enduring the relentless onslaught of evershifting physical, mental, and spiritual torture. Every anxiety I had ever felt as a little girl and as a grown woman – and especially now as the mother of a beautiful, blonde, teenage daughter – was boiling in my veins.

Within minutes my whole being was screaming these primal questions:

“Where were you God on those dark days in St. Catharines? Were you on vacation? Were you too tired, or too busy to care, to do something? Are you such a believer in free will that you can never, ever intervene? Did you not hear their desperate pleas for help, their heartrending screams of despair and desolation?”

And why, oh why, if you are a good and strong God, did you forsake those girls – and for that matter – all the other millions of innocent victims throughout the ages? Maybe you're not good or strong after all.....

And you know what I heard for a full hour as I stomped along: the noise of traffic, the hustle and bustle of people, the drone of airplanes, the backdrop of a big city. But not one word from God. Not one word. Not a single reply. I don't know exactly how long I walked, but I ended up near the water. Then, standing there staring stonily at the harbour, I remembered a tiny detail and something huge shifted within me.

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I remembered how Mrs. French and Mrs. Mahaffey were standing at that corner. They were stoic and expressionless, but they were arm in arm. They were arm in arm! They were together. They were in solidarity. And they had gone back into that courtroom to pay silent and courageous witness to their daughters' suffering, which was all they could do. Kind of like the women standing at the foot of the cross I suddenly thought. Kind of like the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. Brave witnesses to unspeakable tragedy and horror who refused to walk or look away, and in so doing were a felt presence, a loving presence, a strong presence in the midst of evil and pain.

One thought led to another and suddenly I thought of the unspeakable suffering of God. Where was God on that dark afternoon when the sky turned black and so did Jesus' heart, when Jesus uttered the same horrible words of abandonment used by King David? Where was God at Golgotha?

Very simple: God was hanging on a cross. Jesus who was the heart and mind of God in the flesh was hanging on the cross as both perfect and broken human being – and as perfect, loving and still invincible God. And God was present also at the foot of the cross, in the communion of those human beings who refused to walk away.

God was hanging on that cross. But Jesus was fully human and so under the weight of that pain and agony he uttered the same words any human would have uttered. He felt the absence of God, but I do not believe that means he did not also feel the presence of God. Or that he did not seek it. I believe he sought his Father at that moment, just as I hope we would, and in his darkest hour, with darkness all around him, I believe that Jesus still clung to God with both hands. That's the insight of the famous English preacher, Charles Spurgeon, who wrote in a sermon in 1872: "Jesus left hand said "my God," and his right hand said "my God." In the midst of that horrific nightmare, Jesus was clinging to God with both hands.

Inscribed on the wall of a Jewish ghetto in Poland during WWII are these same sentiments about our experience of the absence and presence of God: "I believe in

the sun when it is not shining. I believe in the stars when I cannot see them. And I believe in God when I cannot hear him.”

So I would day did Jesus. So, I would hope, do we. During the darkest days of human history, during the times when our personal skies turn the blackest black and we utter those heartrending cries of abandonment, remember the man on the middle cross of Calvary. Nailed to that cross, vulnerable to insects and birds, to the sun and wind and rain, and to the most predatory animal of all – the human being – Jesus is an icon to the poor, the suffering and the vulnerable that says: “you are not abandoned. I, God in the flesh, I am here. And not only that – if that were not already enough – I God in the flesh, have gone to the place of the dead, so that even the dead are not abandoned or forsaken.”

There is no place where God has not dared to go, no place where God’s power is not felt. Which is the reason we call this Friday, Good Friday. Which is why our middle English forebears called it God’s Friday. This darkest, blackest day of human history belongs to God and God is not on vacation, nor too busy. Which is also why we partake of the Lord’s Supper on this day, that most eloquent Christian way of affirming that on this day God is in communion with us and we – like the women at the foot of the cross – are in communion with one another and with those who suffer.

This is God’s Friday. And it is very good!