

Grace Lutheran Community, 2nd April, 2021: Good Friday

‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’

Luke 23:34

‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’

Matthew 27:46

‘Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.’

Luke 23:46

‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’ This is one of the prayers of Jesus from the cross.

Have you ever had the feeling of being truly ‘alone’, all alone? Here I am not speaking about the experience of actually being all by yourself. Rather, have you ever felt like you were all alone even as the world rushed around you? Have you ever felt alone even though the house was full of noise and family and people who contacted you (even as you know deep down they did from genuine care)?

How awful it can be to feel alone. To sense that no one cares. These feelings can lead to despair and feelings of hopelessness. But the impact can be far-reaching, much more than just our attitudes. In fact, loneliness actually has a physical impact. Research published by the American Psychological Association revealed that people who felt lonely were more likely to get sick. In particular, loneliness makes us more vulnerable to the common cold. But the impact wasn’t limited to moments when we’re away from people. In fact we “can be in a crowded room and feel lonely.”

Psychologists and counsellors are now agreeing that loneliness is Australia’s next epidemic. The 2018 survey of 1,678 people found that one in four Australians report feeling lonely, three or more days every week. One in three Australians never or rarely feel like they belong to a group of friends. And half of all Australians feel lonely at least one day a week.

Believers are not immune from such feelings. We can feel isolated from friends and family. Even in the midst of a group of people, we still can feel ignored and deserted.

The Bible has some examples of wonderful people who were very lonely, and they wrote of their experiences. David was well-acquainted with it, and his honest cries to God are recorded in the Psalms, especially Psalm 25: “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.” God’s prophets often felt the pain of rejection and loneliness. Consider the prophet Jeremiah. The Lord told Jeremiah not to marry. He had few friends. Scholars refer to Jeremiah as the “weeping prophet.” God called him to speak out against the sinfulness of

Judah and warn of impending judgment unless the people of Judah repented and changed their ways. Jeremiah chapter 15 captures the prophet speaking to God about his loneliness, unending pain, and suffering. Despite his pain, Jeremiah trusted the Lord and followed God's calling for his life.

'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?' But this prayer of Jesus from the cross has a context. It sits in the context of seven words from the cross, of which three are prayers to God. This prayer that seems to express 'forsakenness', sits as the centre word (3 before, and 3 after). And the first prayer of Jesus on the cross is: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' (Luke 23:34).

Have you ever contemplated on this prayer of Jesus? Here is Jesus having nails driven through His wrists and His feet in a most brutal way saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Stop for a moment and listen to yourself as you say the words: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

What is Jesus saying? In His last hour, Jesus is saying a prayer, a request to God Almighty. It is remarkable, however, that Jesus isn't asking for Himself! Jesus' prayer is one of complete unselfishness. He is concerned for the people who are responsible for crucifying Him and is asking God to forgive them. Instead of thinking of Himself and His own needs, He is thinking of those whose souls are in much greater peril than His own.

In this prayer at His last hour, Jesus addresses the God of the Universe with the simple term "Father." And He invites us to do the same. When Jesus' disciples ask Him how they should pray, He gives them a prayer that begins, "Our Father..." (Matthew 6:9).

By beginning his prayer with the word "Father," Jesus expresses at the same time a love and a confidence, a trust. One who doubts might pile up all sorts of words about God to give credence to a shaky faith. But one who calls Him simply, "Father," knows Him, trusts Him, and is confident in the outcome.

And so it is also that Jesus is able to say with His last human breath before dying, 'Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.'

Do you remember bedtime prayers as a child? For many of us, this is one of our first faith memories – how mum or dad ended the day with prayers before going to sleep, maybe kneeling at our bedside, or sitting together on the bed. Many of us know and love that bedtime prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep..."

As familiar as "Now I lay me down to sleep..." is for us, "Into Your hand I commit my spirit" was equally as familiar to God's people at the time of Jesus. It was the common nightly prayer which parents taught their children. And this gives us insight into this final prayer of Jesus upon the cross. Jesus' last words before he closes His eyes in death. As one Biblical commentator has put it: "Even on a cross Jesus died like a child falling asleep in His Father's arms"

Jesus adds “Father” to those words from Psalm 31: “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.” There is affection and trust here, even as Jesus entrusts Himself to the Father after having been abandoned by Him. The judgment is complete. Jesus’ mission is accomplished. Our sin has been atoned for. All is now finished, and with His final breath Jesus places Himself into the Father’s hands. Because of what Jesus has done for us upon the cross, by giving His life freely for us and for our salvation, we also may address God not just as Almighty Lord of heaven and earth, but as “Father.” Through what Jesus has done for us, we are restored to a right relationship with our heavenly Father, and we, too, may fall asleep peacefully in Him.

At times in our life we may indeed feel all alone. Our interactions with others may also seem to confirm this. We may also say, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” But here are some questions that may help when you feel disconnected from God. Answering these questions honestly will be worth your time, truth and tears for an encounter with true love and new life found in Christ alone.

1. When you’re hurting, where do you run first?
2. When you’re alone, who do you miss the most?
3. What are you connected to right now that could be disconnecting you from God?
4. When you need wisdom, where do you find it?
5. Do you feel your relationship with God is artificial or authentic?
6. Have you prayed and asked God to become real to you and to fill those empty places meant just for Him?

There’s no better place to connect than to the One who gave His life to connect with you — your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

There may have been times in life when you felt abandoned by God. Maybe it was during a period of sorrow and loss while you underwent grief and pain. We may experience utter despair as we believe we are forsaken by God. Yet even though we feel abandoned, we are not. God remains there for us. We just don’t recognise it.

Into this abyss of hopeless separation and abandonment, Jesus has come to bear our sin and its punishment. The prophet declares, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him [Jesus] the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). The greater mystery of this is how God the Father forsook His Son, His only begotten Son, the Son of whom He declared, “My beloved Son” (Luke 3:22). Now Jesus, the true Son of God from eternity, was the object of God’s wrath and displeasure. Jesus was subjected to the full intensity of the curse of the law which is the complete separation of soul and body from God in hell.

We cannot escape the conclusion: “He bore our sins in His own body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). Finally we need to understand: Why Jesus? It is all about the glorious gospel truth of the vicarious atonement. Why Jesus? Because He was and is our brother. He took on our flesh and blood so that He could be our substitute, being born under the law. Not only did that mean that He was expected to keep the law, but He was also the One chosen by God to endure the punishment prescribed by the law. Being also true God Jesus was the one sacrifice that could be offered for sin, once for all, for all men for all time. As a result of the Saviour willingly submitting Himself even to this God-forsakenness, we have been saved.

Sin causes us to be separated from God. But God’s own Son comes to take our place and our punishment by being forsaken by the Father on the cross. Why? So that we are reconciled to the Father... now and forever.

At some point in all of our lives we have cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” At some point in our lives, we will feel alone. It may happen when someone we dearly love dies, when we find ourselves facing a battle we never wanted to face, or when we’ve been humiliated and made to feel small. Sudden accidents, financial ruin, terminal illness, and all the difficulties we experience in our lives, can leave us reeling. There are thousands of circumstances that can leave us with a sense of forsakenness—when God feels conspicuously silent and absent. But, for those who are walking through dark valleys, there is comfort in this psalm and in this story of Jesus’ agony on the cross. In those times, we can pray to Jesus Christ, because He knows what we are experiencing and facing, as He’s been there.

Remember this faithful word when God seems to have forsaken you on your dark Good Friday afternoon. Remember this cry of the Son of God calling out to heaven in your place, My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? and know that God didn’t abandon Jesus in death or the grave but gave Him victory over both and has given that victory to you through faith. As Paul reminds us in I Corinthians 15, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” And again in Romans 8, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” You are reconciled to God in Jesus. You are justified in Jesus. You are safe in Jesus. And you are never alone. Amen.

For Your suffering in the darkness, for Your cry of abandonment, for Your becoming our sin so that we in You might become the righteousness of God, for Your taking upon Yourself our alienation, our division, our estrangement, our death, we give You thanks, most holy Jesus. Amen.