

Et Tu Brute?

Grace Church, NYC
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The Fourth Word from the Cross
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It would seem that even ill paid torturers have boring days at work. Perhaps on this particular afternoon mocking and taunting their once famous victim as he writhes in agony has already lost its thrill. Instead, they pass the time playing dice to see who takes home his outer garment. And now, at least they can be amused to hear Jesus' cry out, "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**" It is a lament filled with horror and sorrow and even rage. It is a cry that starts not in Jesus' parched throat, but in the pit of his heart. "Et Tu, Brute?" "You too, Father?" Would you too abandon me in my hour of need?

Let's make a few assumptions here. First, this cry was not simply a show of solidarity with our human nature. It wasn't fake. It wasn't a display of feeling to appease our own moments of desperation and doubt. Let's give Jesus' last words the weight they deserve as they straddle the centuries of every generation and people who mouth the same cry. "Why have you forsaken me?" is a full fledged accusation at the betrayal implied by God's absence. It is a lament soaked in grief. It expresses one of our deepest human suspicions. God just isn't there when we need him.

After all, when it gets right down to it, who are we kidding? Who is there to pray to? If there is a God, why doesn't he intervene? If God has the power to create life, why doesn't he use that same power to save us from such blatant horrors, not just of death but especially undeserved death steeped in the vacuum of evil?

And if God is so loving, why so far away? And what good is that same so called "love" if it can do no more than leave us all to staring into the void of suffering and evil and pain together?

The context of Jesus' cry is even more intense as we gather here this spring. Someone recently pointed out that instead of wondering why God allowed Hitler and Stalin to do what they did, the question is now why *nature itself* seems so inhospitable to us. This past few months alone we all watched and listened to daily news of earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, fires, tornadoes, storms and attendant nuclear meltdowns. How do we hear news like this and not cry out in utterly numb despair? Any reasonable person might join their own voice to that of Jesus, "My God, My God, why has thou forsaken us all?" At the heart of the question is this dilemma: Is Jesus simply mouthing a *feeling* of abandonment, or was he on to something really big. Does God forsake us? **Can** God intervene?

As a parent myself I remember well my own impulse to rush in with reassurance when my own infant daughter would bloody her knee, or let out a loud wail when her bad dreams woke her. Something in me still wants to rush to reassure. To hug pain away. To proclaim unseen hope and triumph over evil and death. To trust the meaning of resurrection to a mostly hurting world. But what about you God? Where is your motherly soul? Where have you been this past winter and spring? Why have you abandoned us?

Abandonment often doesn't reach us in the vast numbers of unknown victims, but in the particularity of the one. I'll never forget the funeral sermon that an Episcopal priest named John Claypool preached for his own ten year old daughter, Laura Lue, who died of leukemia some years ago.

In his sermon he mentions when he first heard the fatal diagnosis from the doctor: “There is no way to describe the mixture of horror and bitterness and terror and fear that churns up within you at the advent of such a realization (Chorus of Witnesses, Ed. Tom Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., 125). He remembered leaning into the story of Abraham being tested in his faith, asked to give up his only son Isaac. Surely God would save his daughter as well. In the days and months to come their family struggled to bear up under the weight of the disease. “There were times,” John says, “when Laura Lue was hurting so intensely that she had to bite on a rag and used to beg me to pray to God to take away that awful pain. I would kneel down beside her bed and pray with all the faith and conviction of my soul, and nothing would happen except the pain continuing to rage on.” Or again, that same negative conclusion tempted when she asked me in the dark of the night: ‘When will this leukemia go away?’ I answered: ‘I don’t know, darling, but we are doing everything we know to make that happen.’ Then she said: ‘Have you asked God when it will go away?’ And I said: ‘Yes, you have heard me pray to him many times.’ But she persisted: ‘What did he say? When did he say it would go away?’ And I had to admit to myself he had not said a word! I had done a lot of talking and praying and pleading, but the response of the heavens had been silence (126).”

So what is the deal God? Where were you for Laura Lue, and for those who loved and cared for her? And for the millions upon who recently cried out to you as your own creation swallowed them up? And for the billions upon billions who pray every day for just the means to live? It’s all the same question. *Abba. Father!* Where are you now and where were you then when your own son cried out to you that day on the cross?

Here is the place where a good preacher is suppose to make it all right, to pull upon the weight of our faith, to point to the strength of a God who loves us so much he sent his son to die for us and save us from the cost and consequence our sins. And I do believe that with my whole heart and soul. And indeed, I trust and know that the full power and glory of Easter is on its way. But for now, for this hour I’m inclined simply stay under that cross with those soldiers and onlookers who are numb to the new creation just over the horizon, but most of all, to stay with Jesus himself.

Let’s stay with his final prayer and *buoyant* doubt, for indeed, that is what it is. Where did we Christians ever get the notion that we must not question God or that we have no right to pour out our souls to him our moments of vibrant doubt, and ask, “Why?” *Jesus did!*

Prayer starts where we are. Prayer stays with what is real. And honest prayer honors God when we come clean and admit out loud and to each other: sometimes God, (even God!), (especially God) owes us an explanation!

Jesus’ last utterance was directed and honest and prayer. Engaged prayer. Desperate, unfiltered, uncensored prayer. “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

If Jesus can pray like this, so can we.