

THE CRY OF DERELICTION

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The Seven Last Words of Christ: The Fourth Word

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, la'ma sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:45-46)

Peter Abelard was a French philosopher, theologian, and logician who lived from 1079 to 1142. He was, without a doubt, one of the great minds of the middle ages. He taught at the Cathedral School of Notre Dame in Paris, and students would flock to him from every country in Europe. His treatments of theological doctrines and philosophical questions were bold, brilliant, and brash. As a teacher he was eloquent and compelling. As a debater he was unbeatable. Unfortunately, Abelard is perhaps better known today for his tragic love affair with Heloise than he is for his intellectual output. Heloise was the young niece of a cathedral canon named Fulbert. Abelard fell in love with Heloise and fathered a child with her. Fulbert wasn't happy at all. To make a long, passionate, and gruesome story short, Heloise became a nun and eventually an abbess. Abelard became a monk and for a time a hermit who lived in the woods with a trusted servant named Thibault.

One evening Abelard and Thibault were preparing supper in their hermitage when they heard from the forest a small but piercing scream of anguish. "Was that a child?" asked Abelard. "No, it's just a rabbit in a trap," replied Thibault. "I saw Hugh setting them down earlier today. No need to worry." Suddenly they heard the sound again, and it sent shivers up their spines. It was the cry of a creature in unbearable pain and mortal fear. Without hesitation the two plunged into the forest and ran in the direction of the noise. "Down by the river," said Thibault. "I saw them playing there today." As they ran they heard the terrible cry again. "O God," panted Abelard, still running. "Let it die. Let it die quickly." But the rabbit shrieked again and again.

The two men finally reached the trap. Thibault pulled apart the metal jaws, and Abelard lifted the broken, bloody little thing in his arms. It lay there for a moment, breathing heavily. Then, with what seemed to be recognition of the kindness shown to it at the last, the rabbit nestled its head in Abelard's arm, and it died. The creature's final act broke Abelard's heart, and he said, "Thibault, do you think there is a God at all? Whatever has come to me, I earned it. But what did this one do?"¹

Two things are clear about the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. The first is this: throughout the three year's of his public ministry, Jesus had foreseen his death in Jerusalem. He knew what he was doing. He knew that the road he was traveling upon would take him to the cross. The Gospel authors indicate that he even knew resurrection would follow the cross. It seems that Jesus was very much the choreographer of the first Holy Week. Thus, the One we look on today died not by accident, not because he stepped accidentally into a trap. Rather, he allowed himself to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners. He laid down his life for us, intentionally and deliberately so that the trap would not spring on us. It is why we call this day good.

A second thing is also clear: by Thursday night of the first Holy Week, any supernatural or even strategic knowledge that Jesus possessed of his impending death was gone. It was withdrawn from him. The divine assurance he had of resurrection was suspended. The close, intimate oneness he enjoyed with God was severed. Darkness was over all the land, and it appears that the darkness

covered Jesus as well. In the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed that God might spare him from the ordeal he was about to endure (Luke 22:42). Then during his crucifixion, in unbearable pain and mortal fear, he cried out the fourth word from the cross, *“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”*

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, what we call the fourth word from the cross was actually the first, and the last, and the only word from the cross. We have come to call it the cry of dereliction. The words are actually identical to the first line of Psalm 22, and from earliest times Biblical scholars have engaged in a vigorous debate. Was Jesus really quoting the Psalms on the cross, or did Matthew and Mark merely put the words on his lips and write them into their Gospels? Skeptics have pointed out how unlikely it would have been for Jesus, in his dying sorrow, to have the presence of mind to be scoring theological points with Psalm quotations. On the other hand, we must remember that Jesus hung there for six hours. To me, it seems highly plausible that he, who knew the Scriptures well, would have recited familiar passages to endure the hours and bear the pain. It was these words that the Centurion and the bystanders at the foot of the cross overheard and remembered. Either way, the witness here is of a person who felt utterly and devastatingly abandoned, even forsaken by God. *He was despised and rejected; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3).*

What deeper meaning might we find in the likelihood that Jesus cried out in dereliction from the cross? Paul the Apostle, in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans, writes that all of creation is in bondage to decay. *We know, he writes, that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves ... groan inwardly, as we wait for adoption ... the redemption of our bodies.* All of creation has fallen short of the glory of God and waits for redemption. All of creation cries out in dereliction, in abandonment, in the experience of separation from God. We hear the cry still today, especially in this time of pandemic.

Already, cultural commentators are calling the current coronavirus crisis a defining event of our day. It will mark our psyches as did Pearl Harbor and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. We will always remember where we sheltered in place and whom we lost. I certainly remember September 11, 2001. I was serving a church in Cincinnati, and some parishioners of mine lost a son in the south tower of the World Trade Center. At the time we didn't know the details of how he died, only the great sadness that he did. Years later a friend from Cincinnati shared a recording of an emergency phone call from the 105th floor of the south tower moments before it collapsed. After listening to the recording I wished that I could unhear it. The caller was a co-worker of my parishioners' son, and mentioned his name as one of three men who were trapped in an office. The caller was pleading with the emergency operator for the fire department to hurry. *“We're young men; we're not ready to die,”* he said. Then as the tower collapsed he cried out, *“Oh God! Oh ...”*

The cry of dereliction is almost unbearable to hear. No one could get there in time. Abelard and Thibault simply could not run fast enough to save the ensnared rabbit from the trap. At the foot of Jesus' cross the bystanders thought Jesus was calling for Elijah to come save him. When no one came to his rescue, all they could do was reach up a sponge of sour wine for him to drink, perhaps as an act of kindness at the last. Ultimately, sadly, we are all bystanders to one another's suffering. No one can fully plunge into the depths of another's pain.

Recently, I read a news article about how some deep sea explorers had discovered the wreck of the USS Hornet, a great World War Two aircraft carrier. The Hornet had only been a year at sea when lost in October of 1942, but it was from her flight deck that Doolittle launched his raid. Then two months later she was one of three crucial carriers that won the Battle of Midway. Today she lies 17,500 feet beneath the surface of the ocean. To find her the explorers used a special robotic submersible, capable of plunging to the deepest depths of the ocean. It may strike

you as an unconventional analogy, but I think what Jesus was doing on cross, particularly with his cry of dereliction, was something similar. Jesus' purpose was to plunge to the deepest, darkest place of human experience, and feel its full weight and pressure. Why? So that he could find the wreckage of humanity. So that he could share in the sufferings of the whole creation, and in so doing reach us who groan in travail as we wait for God's redemption.

Suffering can do strange things to the mind. When we are bystanders to suffering, we come under the delusion that it can't happen to us; it happens to other people. Then when the trap springs, when tragedy does strike, as it does in every life, the first delusion is replaced by a second: that no one before has ever suffered as we do. No one can know what it's like to feel my pain, we think. Sometimes the only way to reach and save a suffering person is through the power of shared suffering. It was essential for Jesus to lose the lively fellowship he enjoyed with his heavenly Father so that he could identify with the whole creation that cries out, "Is there a God at all?" He can meet us at the point of our utter abandonment and forsakenness precisely because he has been down to such a depth. And not only can he meet us, he can show us the light beyond through his resurrection.

When the helpless rabbit died in Peter Abelard's arms, Abelard turned to his friend and said, "Thibault, do you think there is a God at all? Whatever has come to me, I earned it. But what did this one do?" Thibault nodded and replied, "I know. Only – I think God is in it, too." God is in it. One of Abelard's novel theological ideas concerned the Doctrine of the Atonement. How is it, he wondered, that Christ makes us one with God? He rejected the conventional formulations that the cross was God's way of punishing sin, or that the death of Jesus was a transaction with the devil by which God purchased back our souls. Rather, he saw the whole life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – but most especially his dying sorrow and mortal anguish on the cross – as a demonstration of how far, how deep God would go to reach us. The cross, then, can melt the hearts of those who truly survey it. The writers of Mark and Matthew tell us of one such person at the foot of the cross. The centurion who had been witness to the whole experience heard Jesus' cry of dereliction and declared, "Truly, this man was the Son of God."

The centurion's confession points to the reason why we listen today, and try not to unhear Jesus' cry, "*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" It can break your heart to hear any cry of dereliction. But if God is in it as a fellow sufferer, as the centurion declared – if God is in it too, as Thibault discerned – it can do more than break your heart. It can also allow you to trust that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. *For the creature waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. For the creature itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Romans 8:19, 21).*

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¹ The story of Abelard and Thibault is told by Helen Waddell in *Peter Abelard*, 1933, and by Wesley Carr in *Tested by the Cross*, 1992.