

Jesus Forsaken

Psalm 22:1-18

How long have you spent on hold over the past week? How about the past month?

Sometimes you can wait an extraordinary amount of time
to speak to your *electricity provider* or to the *tax office* or to *whoever*.
I often find myself thinking that the long waiting periods
are a deliberate ploy to get us to hang up!
It can be very frustrating when we want to grab someone's attention
but are left with nothing but stony silence

Have you ever tried catching a cab during the changeover period,
when one group of cabbies are ending their shift

and another group are beginning theirs?

That can be a very difficult time to grab the attention of a cab driver.
I remember many a morning when, as a younger man out on the town,
My friends and I couldn't get any cab to stop and pick us up at 3am.
(Maybe that had something to do

with being a group of young men out at 3am!)

Have you been up into Hornsby Myer lately?

Have you tried to grab the attention of a shop assistant at Hornsby Myer?
In case you haven't heard Hornsby Myer is about to close down,
and so they're not investing a lot of money on maintaining staffing levels.
It's such a lonely empty space!
You call out for help and all you get back is an echo!!!
It's very hard to get anyone's attention because there's nobody there.

What about gaining God's attention?

Have you had trouble eliciting a response from God?

Maybe you've been asking God the same question for years:

Please Lord, make me well again!
God, I'm sick of getting nowhere in life, help me turn it around!
Please Father, help my children to not make such a mess of their lives!
But sometimes it feels like we're shouting and waving, but all to no avail.
God can feel distant,
it can feel as if he doesn't care,
it can feel like he isn't even real.

This is not an unusual feeling.

In our Bible readings we heard words from two characters, from two men,
that express this feeling of being ignored by God.
Its interesting, isnt it, that the Bible itself doesn't shy away from this idea
that believers can have a hard time as they seek to maintain their trust in God.

The two men are David and Jesus, and, using the same words,
they both give voice to this sense of being forsaken by God.

What these words can do for us today
is that they can help us navigate those times
when we might be left wondering whether God has closed his ears to us,

and they can also help us hear the great big *yes* that God *does* send our way;
they point us to the one great answer to prayer that God *will* always provide.

We start in the Old Testament with some words first spoken by King David

The opening lines of Psalm 22 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why
are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? ² My God, I cry out by day,
but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.

We don't know the exact circumstances that prompted David to write these words,
but we do know that, like many prominent leaders,
David not only had his followers but he also made his fair share of enemies.

Before he was king, young David wasn't spending his time waiting for cabs at 3am,
David was out leading the Israelite Army in great victories,
and this success made him a target for his predecessor, King Saul,
who became insanely jealous and forced David to flee into the wilderness.
So you can imagine David thinking
*"Hang on, one minute it seems that God is right here with me,
I'm slaying giants and winning battles,
but the next thing you know I've got half the King's army baying for my blood.
These are they guys I've just been helping! What is going on?"*

And so he cries out to God "Why have you forsaken me? Where have you gone?!"
And it can seem like that to us sometimes can't it?
Sometimes God will give us a great victory,
but then we come crashing down to earth,
and that crash can be brutal, perplexing and very lonely
My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.

Sometimes the crash is through no fault of our own,
we can find ourselves doing exactly what it is that God has appointed us to do
but up pops an enemy, up pops a problem, and things come screeching to halt.
But sometimes God's silence is a product of our own foolishness.

Sometime after he became King, David had a moral failing
where he took another man's wife and then had that other man killed.
And as part of David's punishment,
God declared that David's own household would turn against him.
And so once more David found himself to be a target,

this time it was his own son who was after David's head.

So David knew all about what it was like for God to withhold his protection,
he knew that sometimes this was because of his own sin,
he knew that sometimes this was for reasons that weren't exactly clear.

What other words does David use to express this feeling of abandonment?

Verse 7 All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. ⁸ "He trusts in the LORD," they say, "let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him."

Many of us know the feeling of being mocked for our faith.

"Go on, say a prayer to your magic sky fairy."

"Its only the weak who need a religion, they use it as a crutch"

"Teaching Christianity to children is a form of child abuse"

These are all insults that are currently in use,
you'll see them pop up on the letters page of our metropolitan newspapers,
some will have these insults hurled from supposed friends and even family.
It can make you wonder – "Why isn't God coming to my aid?
Why doesn't he silence them?"

Sometimes the attacks move beyond words and they become physical.

Verse 13 Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against me.

And again at verse 16 Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.

Stripped naked and torn to bits.

I'm not sure that David ever experienced this directly,
but he knew that if his enemies caught up with him
then this is exactly what he could expect them to do.

And it's also true that many of our brothers and sisters across the world
live in danger of this kind of treatment day by day,
the danger of having property confiscated
or even of having their own lives brutally snuffed out.

I've read that Easter and Christmas especially are times when
violence against Christians seems to escalate in some parts of the world.
It's not hard to imagine asking the question, is it, "Where are you God?"
"We are your people, and you're letting them treat us like this? What's up?"

And so then it comes as no real surprise
that David feels physically exhausted by all this.

Verse 14 I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.

These days science tells us quite a bit about the physical reactions to stress,
David experienced this, and it only adds to the problems, doesn't it?
Over time our physical capacity to fight and respond is diminished,

and physical incapacity becomes its own special form of suffering,
it's own special prompt that leads us to ask the question:
"Where are you God?"

And so David's words are comfort and a challenge for us, aren't they?
A comfort in that in them we hear someone identifying with our own experience,
but they're a challenge in that even David was not spared a difficult life.
And the challenge and comfort would be repeated about a thousand years later
when another leader of God's people would have a similar experience.

Our second reading was from Matthew 27,
a reading describing the events of the very first Good Friday.
Did you notice the remarkable parallels between how Jesus was crucified,
and what David wrote in Psalm 22?
Not just one parallel, but a *whole raft* of them:

- We have the physical act of the crucifixion itself with pierced hands and feet; something David mentions in verse 16 of Psalm 22.
- We have the confiscation of property,
including the very same detail of clothing being divided up by lots.
- We have the mocking voices of those observing the crucifixion,
quoting the very same words as found in Psalm 22:8
He trusts in God, let God rescue him.
- In another Gospel Jesus is recorded as saying from the cross "I'm thirsty",
echoing David's complaint that his mouth is dried up like a potsherd.
- And of course, Jesus chooses to use David's very own words from Ps 22:1
to express his own distress as he hung on the cross
My God My God, why have you forsaken me?

It really is a remarkable feature of the Bible
to see the events of Easter so clearly foreshadowed a thousand years earlier.
And this is no fabrication.
This is no deliberate ploy by the early Christians
to orchestrate Christ's death in such a way
as to make it *appear* to be a fulfillment of prophecy.
The Romans soldiers were not aware of Psalm 22
when they divided up the garments in the way described by David.

To my mind the parallels indicate that this event has divine fingerprints all over it.
God is doing something here. And what is he doing?

Well, first of all he's identifying himself with our human experience.
Just as David knew what it was like to cry out to God with no response,
so too did Jesus.
God the Son cried out to God the Father,
distressed at what was happening to him
and the Father did not intervene; the Father let . it . happen.

The school where I was educated has a special day
when parents take the place of their students.
The parents have to get up and catch the bus or train,
they have to carry their backpacks around
they have to run from classroom to classroom
and keep track of all the events on the time table.

The idea is to make money I think, parents are sponsored to participate,
but the extra benefit is that parents have a new appreciation
of what their children endure day by day.

Does God care about me and what I'm enduring?
Of course he does. He's suffered the taunts of skeptics,
he's suffered the physical exhaustion, the physical pain,
he's suffered the feeling of being forsaken by God.

But there is also something deeper that's happening here.
Remember when we said that God's silence,
God's distance that he might keep from us,
that could either be for reasons that are a mystery
or it could be because of our own failings.
David suffered because of the nastiness of others
but also because of his own sins.

Well, note that when Jesus cried out My God my God why have you forsaken me
it was also a moment when an unusual darkness descended upon the scene.
Darkness is often used as a symbol of God's displeasure and judgment,
and so the suggestion is that the distance felt by Jesus here
was not only the distance we feel from God when we are innocently suffering,
but its also the distance which is ours when we've done something wrong.

We've seen plenty of examples recently
of wrongdoers who've suffered *isolation* because of their sins.
Cheating Australian cricketers – banned.
Abusive Hollywood heavyweights – blacklisted
Unfaithful political party leaders – isolated on the backbench

And it's the same with those who reject God and his ways,
although to a much more horrifying degree.
What will Jesus say to those whose sins remain not forgiven?
Depart from me you evil-doers, I never knew you.
Isolation and silence from God, that's what sinners deserve.
And it's what Jesus himself endured on the cross, in our place.

He was forsaken, so that we wouldn't have to be, terrible sinners that we are.
This is the great *Yes* that God will send our way if we ask for it.

He may very well ask us to suffer terribly for a time,
but he'll never ask us to remain not forgiven in our sins.
If we want to have our wrongdoing cancelled out,
then he will do so, because Jesus endured the rejection that our sins deserve.

We've only looked at one half of Psalm 22,
and we've only looked at one half of the Easter story.
On Sunday we'll spend some time looking at the second halves of both,
And we'll see that God's silence in both cases was only temporary;
Both David and Jesus had to wait, but God did respond.

But already we can see one prayer that we'll never have to wait for,
and it's the prayer to have our sins wiped away and forgiven.
Christ has seen to it that the cost these sins incur,
the cost of estrangement from God, that has been paid in full.
He was forsaken so that we can be forgiven.

Let's seek an answer to that prayer right now.

Those seeking forgiveness first time, I pray on their behalf
Those who have known of this forgiveness, I lead them in thanks...