

PSALM 22: GOD SAVES

[Chelmsford 14 August 2011]

When Jesus was dying on the cross, he shouted out the opening verse of Psalm 22: **"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"**.

Why? What was going through his mind? Did he really believe God had left him? Or was he actually affirming his faith in God?

The answer is found in Psalm 22: for as the heading of the GNB makes clear, this Psalm is both: *"A cry of anguish and a song of praise"*.

THE PSALMIST AFFIRMS HIS FAITH IN THE GOD WHO SAVES

1) *A Cry of Anguish (Ps 22.1-21)*

The first 21 verses are a long-drawn out cry of anguish: **"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? I have cried desperately for help, but still it does not come?"** is the first verse of a litany of troubles.

Why? What has happened to him?

Some have suggested that it was *a physical problem*.

In vv14,15 the Psalmist speaks of being unwell and close to death: **"My strength is gone, gone like water spilt on the ground. All my bones are out of joint; my heart is like melted wax. My throat is as dry as dust, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. You have left me for dead in the dust"**. On the other hand, it is possible that we have here just a figure of speech. So Weiser: *"We can interpret all these phenomena as manifestations of the physical reaction which takes effect in his body at the moment of extreme distress, making him shake with fear - we are not compelled to think in this connection of an illness"*.

Certainly, whatever the trouble, it did not involve merely physical suffering.

It involved *ostracisation by his fellows*: The Psalmist felt he'd been sent to Coventry v6: **"I am no longer a human being; I am a worm, despised and scorned by everyone"**.

He felt himself surrounded on all sides by people hostile to him.

- So in v12 he likens his enemies to bulls: **"Many enemies surround me like bulls; they are all round me, like fierce bulls from the land of Bashan"**.
- v13 he likens his enemies to **lions**
- v16 he speaks of his enemies as **dogs**

The precise nature of the trouble is unknown. But this does not really matter

The very uncertainty of the interpretation makes it easier for us to identify with this poor man.

However, the intensity of his pain lay not so much in that which had occasioned the suffering, as that in the midst of his sufferings he felt himself abandoned by God. It was this sense of being forsaken by God which gave him his greatest anguish. This was his fundamental problem. **"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? I have cried desperately for help, but still it does not come. During the day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer; I call at night, but get no rest"** (Ps 22.1-2).

Nothing can be worse for a believer than to have to cope with a world that is falling in and to feel that God is not there. In such a circumstance faith is tested to the limit.

But notice how the Psalmist offers two clues as to how to cope in such a crisis of faith.

i) *He reminds himself of the experience others have had of God.*

vv3-5: **"Our ancestors put their trust in you; they trusted you and you saved them... They trusted you and were not disappointed"**.

Abraham, Isaac & Jacob, Moses, Joshua and all the others who had gone before him had trusted in God - and had not been disappointed.

The faith of others can be marvellously reassuring in times of time.

ii) *He reminds himself of his own experience of God in the past.*

vv9f: **".. I have relied on you since the day I was born, and you have always been my God"**

Notice that even in the midst of his distress, he is still able to talk of God as "**my God**". God may be distant, and yet he knows himself in some kind of relationship to God. Unlike the fool quoted in Ps 14.1 he does not say, "**There is no God**". On the contrary he cries out, "**My God, my God**".

God in his wisdom & compassion may not appear to answer our prayers, but this does not mean that he is not present in his love.

There are times when we are called to believe - in spite of our circumstances.

NB L.Griffiths: *"Faith is believing that God is never closer to us than in the darkness of our suffering & sin. Faith is believing that God is in midst of that black, ugly darkness, bringing out all possible good. Faith is believing that God never forsakes us, even though we forsake him. Faith is praying to God even when there seems no one & nothing there. Faith is calling him 'My God'"*

Perhaps for some of you all this talk of darkness seems unreal.

You cannot imagine how a person can go through a crisis of faith of such dark intensity. And yet such crises do happen.

But, thank God, the darkness does not last forever!

The Psalmist's cry of anguish turns into a song of praise

ii) *A Song of Praise (Ps 22.22-31)*

Listen to vv22-24: **"I will tell my people what you have done; I will praise you in their assembly: Praise him, you servants of the Lord! Honour him, you descendants of Jacob! Worship him, you people of Israel! He does not neglect the poor or ignore their suffering; he does not run away from them, but answers when they call for help"**

What precisely happened between vv21 & 22 we are not told.

All we know is that now the Psalmist expresses supreme faith & confidence in God.

Perhaps we are to imagine a lapse of time - healing had taken place - his enemies had had their come-uppance. The tables had been turned.

Whatever, sunshine has replaced the darkness.

So in v27 we find the Psalmist looking forward to "**all the nations**" turning to God. "**From every part of the world they will turn to him; all races will worship him**". The story has a happy ending.

JESUS AFFIRMS HIS FAITH IN THE GOD WHO SAVES

From the so-called "righteous sufferer" of Psalm 22, let us turn to Jesus, the righteous sufferer par excellence. Jesus on the Cross cried out to God in the words of Psalm 22: "**My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?**"

I believe that it is highly significant that Jesus quoted from this Psalm on the Cross. It tells us so much about Jesus - and about his understanding of the Cross.

i) The Agony of the Cross

In the first place, we see here the agony of the Cross Crucifixion at the best of times was 'excruciating'. It was pain beyond imagining. Yet for Jesus the supreme agony of the cross lay not in its physical pain, but in the awful sense of God's absence. "**My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?**" Of all the so-called 'words' on the Cross none is more dreadful

It is a dreadful cry - but also an embarrassing cry. How could the Son of God say such a thing?

It is an interesting fact that this cry was omitted by Luke & John - the omission may well have been deliberately. It perhaps just didn't seem right to include these words on the lips of Jesus.

Yes, Christians have found it difficult to believe that Jesus could have felt abandoned by God. E.g. some centuries later one Christian copyist tried to change the words of the text - instead of copying "Why have you abandoned me?", he wrote: "**Why did you reproach me?**" I.e. Why did you give me over to reproach?- why are you letting me be treated in such a fashion by men?

Much as we would like to think otherwise, Jesus felt totally abandoned. The agony of that sense of abandonment must have been intense - and all the more so, when you remember that up until that day Jesus had enjoyed the most intimate of relationships with God. For unlike any other Jew of his day, Jesus had dared to address God as "Abba", "Father, dear father".

What caused this terrible cry? Not the dreadful form of death Rather the fact that Jesus in dying for us on the Cross was at that moment bearing the sin of the world, and in so doing he experienced inevitable separation from his Father. The Apostle Paul put it this way: "**Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him share our sin in order that in union with him we might share the righteousness of God**" (2 Cor 5.21).

This was the agony of the Cross - Jesus went through hell - in order that we might go

to heaven. Jesus allowed himself to be cut off from God, in order that we might be brought near to God.

ii) The triumph of the Cross

And yet, along with agony, there was triumph too.

Indeed it is possible that the note of triumph is even to be found in that cry from the cross, and that Jesus was not questioning God, but actually affirming his faith in God. For Jesus may not just have been quoting the opening verse of Psalm 22

The bystanders may just have heard the words "**My God, my God, why have you abandoned me**", but it is not beyond possibility that in fact as he hung on that Cross he recited to himself the whole of that Psalm.

Dennis Nineham, one of my professors when I was a student at Cambridge: "*There is some evidence that the opening words of Psalm 22 were interpreted in the light of the rest and were recognised as an effective form of prayer for help in time of trouble*".

Certainly, if the mind of Jesus was on that Psalm, then he may well have remembered not only the Psalmist's cry of anguish, but also his song of praise

I.e. strange as it may seem, this terrible cry of anguish may also have contained within it a cry of triumph.

The glorious truth, of course, that Jesus did triumph over sin and death.

- The powers of evil did their best to defeat him - but Jesus rose victorious on Easter Day.
- Indeed, Jesus triumphed on Good Friday. For when Jesus breathed his last "**The curtain hanging in the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom**" (Mt 27.51; Mk 14.38). This curtain, separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple, was torn as a sign that Jesus in his dying opened the way into the presence of God - he created the possibility of us having a new/direct relationship with God. Jesus in dying for us has dealt with that sin that stood between us and God. Jesus allowed himself to be abandoned by God that we might be brought near to God - that we might call God 'Abba, Father'.

There in the agony and in the apparent abandonment God was working his purpose out. God may have seemed absent - and yet he was present, working for your salvation and for mine.

Our God is a God who saves. And it is precisely this which we come to celebrate this morning as we eat bread and drink wine.