

## Psalm 22

# The image of the crucified

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- 1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,  
and are so far from my salvation,  
from the words of my distress?
- 2 O my God, I cry in the daytime,  
but you do not answer;  
and by night also, but I find no rest.
- 3 Yet you are the Holy One,  
enthroned upon the praises of Israel.
- 4 Our forebears trusted in you;  
they trusted, and you delivered them.
- 5 They cried out to you and were delivered;  
they put their trust in you and were not confounded.

- 6 But as for me, I am a worm and no man,  
scorned by all and despised by the people.
- 7 All who see me laugh me to scorn;  
they curl their lips and wag their heads, saying,
- 8 'He trusted in the Lord; let him deliver him;  
let him deliver him, if he delights in him.'
- 9 But it is you that took me out of the womb  
and laid me safe upon my mother's breast.
- 10 On you was I cast ever since I was born;  
you are my God even from my mother's womb.
- 11 Be not far from me, for trouble is near at hand  
and there is none to help.
- 12 Mighty oxen come around me;  
fat bulls of Bashan close me in on every side.
- 13 They gape upon me with their mouths,  
as it were a ramping and a roaring lion.
- 14 I am poured out like water;  
all my bones are out of joint;  
my heart has become like wax  
melting in the depths of my body.

- 15 My mouth is dried up like a potsherd;  
my tongue cleaves to my gums;  
you have laid me in the dust of death.
- 16 For the hounds are all about me;  
the pack of evildoers close in on me;  
they pierce my hands and my feet.
- 17 I can count all my bones;  
they stand staring and looking upon me.
- 18 They divide my garments among them;  
they cast lots for my clothing.
- 19 Be not far from me, O Lord;  
you are my strength; hasten to help me.
- 20 Deliver my soul from the sword,  
my poor life from the power of the dog.
- 21 Save me from the lion's mouth,  
from the horns of wild oxen.  
You have answered me!
- 22 I will tell of your name to my people;  
in the midst of the congregation will I praise you.
- 23 Praise the Lord, you that fear him;  
O seed of Jacob, glorify him;  
stand in awe of him, O seed of Israel.

- 24 For he has not despised nor abhorred the suffering of the poor;  
neither has he hidden his face from them;  
but when they cried to him he heard them.
- 25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;  
I will perform my vows  
in the presence of those that fear you.
- 26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek the Lord shall praise him;  
their hearts shall live for ever.
- 27 All the ends of the earth  
shall remember and turn to the Lord,  
and all the families of the nations shall bow before him.
- 28 For the kingdom is the Lord's  
and he rules over the nations.
- 29 How can those who sleep in the earth  
bow down in worship,  
or those who go down to the dust kneel before him?
- 30 He has saved my life for himself;  
my descendants shall serve him;  
this shall be told of the Lord for generations to come.

- 31 They shall come and make known his salvation,  
to a people yet unborn,  
declaring that he, the Lord, has done it.

## Reflection

Traditionally read or sung on Good Friday, this Psalm, giving a graphic account of the terrible suffering of a servant of God, will for Christians always be associated with the crucifixion of Jesus. Indeed some of the detail of the narrative in the gospels of Mark and Matthew – the casting of lots for the clothing, the scorn of those watching – may well have come from the Psalm. So it takes us right into the events of the first Good Friday on the hill outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Because it is part of the Good Friday liturgy the assumption can easily be made that it tells a story of abandonment throughout. In fact the Psalm divides into two. Verses 1 to 21 are a vivid account of the sufferer's agony even as he holds to faith. Verses 22 to the end see his faith vindicated and the Psalm moves from abandonment to deliverance. Above all it is a Psalm about the most tenacious faith. This sufferer will not abandon trust in God even when all his experience tells him that God has abandoned him. Faith remains, and in the end, triumphs.

The way that God is addressed in the opening verse: 'My God, my God' (which reminds us of the beginning of Psalm 63, 'O God you are my God', and is repeated at the beginning of the second verse) suggests a deep intimacy. The mystery of the

divine presence is the grounding reality of this sufferer's heart. Now all sense of it is gone. Anguished and restless he cries out to God by day and by night but to no avail. However like Job, this sufferer, in his agony and abandonment does not curse God, nor does he despair. He remembers. He remembers the story of his people and their trust (verses 3 to 5), and he remembers the miracle of his coming into being (verses 9 to 10). This God delivered his people when they cried to him, and like a tender midwife this God took him from his mother's womb and laid him safe upon her breast. He remembers that from his first breath this divine Other has nurtured and protected him. Now, forsaken and abandoned, scorned and mocked, surrounded and physically disintegrating, these memories hold him.

They hold him until verse 21, which comes as the climax of the first half and feels to be both the moment of his final succumbing, and the moment of his faith being finally vindicated. In the dramatic words 'You have answered me!', spoken as he succumbs to 'the lion's mouth' and 'the horns of wild oxen' – two synonyms for death – Christians will hear the last word of Jesus in the Gospel of John as he dies, 'it is accomplished'. It is the final expression of faith at the moment when faith appears to have failed.

With these words we glimpse the first shaft of the resurrection morning's light.

In verses 22 to the end, the Psalm becomes a great exclamation of praise which, like a huge ripple of energy moves out across all space and all time – from the first 'congregation', to 'the great congregation', to 'the ends of the earth', to 'the families of the nations', to 'generations to come', to 'a people yet unborn'.

So this Psalm tells Christianity's central story. In Jesus Christ, as the Apostle Paul put it, 'God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5.19). In this crucified one he embraced fully all the darkness, alienation and pain that humankind knows, suffers and perpetrates. So the cross has become, in Christianity, the central symbol and sign of wholeness, of integration. The image of Christ crucified is at its heart.

In the great family of the world's religions there are many symbols and images that peoples in different cultures have been drawn to as they have sought to understand the mystery of life.

Buddhism gives us the image of the Buddha, the 'awakened' one, seated in wordless meditation free from 'samsara', the cycle of birth and death. In our stressed Western world it is an image that many find deeply attractive.

Hinduism offers us many images but perhaps the best known is called 'Nataraj', meaning 'king of dance'. It is the image of Shiva, one of the great gods of Hinduism, dancing in a circle of flames. Beautiful in its harmony and rhythm, it captures something of the divine energy at the heart of the cosmos, as well as expressing the triumph of the divine over evil. While Shiva's left leg is raised in dance, his right leg is treading on the dwarf of ignorance or illusion.

Christianity too has many images. There is the Byzantine image of Christ in majesty, or the image of Christ enfleshed as a child (think of the magnificent painting by Rubens above the altar at King's College Cambridge), but its central image will always be Christ crucified – a body on a cross bleeding, wounded and dying. It is the image portrayed in this Psalm and is Christianity's special contribution to how religion can be so life-giving.

This image integrates and heals for it enables all that is beyond the pale, all that is shameful and bad, all that is beyond speaking about, all that has been split off and disowned, to be owned and even embraced. The Apostle's Creed speaks of Christ descending into hell, into the abyss of darkness and separation, and reclaiming it for life.

I remember once being told by a psychotherapist friend about a woman patient who in therapy felt she wanted to flay this image of the crucified with a whip. Somehow the image before her connected with some profound pain within her. As she took hold of the whip and began to lash at this image she found herself, in deep distress, repeating again and again the words: '*now you know . . . now you know . . . now you know*'. Responding to the sight of the crucified in this way enabled her to own her own pain – what had been done to her as a child. Through this terrible image of woundedness, she could recognize and own her own woundedness and so integrate it into her conscious mind. It was a significant step towards her healing.

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' *Because of its agony, its narrative of alienation, this Psalm speaks of life and hope. Hence its triumphant end.*

Reflect on what this very familiar image means to you. Are there particular places or situations where it has spoken to you?

Give thanks for your own faith and the community of which you are a part. Offer any people or situations that you particularly know of, who suffer the kind of abandonment that this Psalm speaks of.

Bless God for the first shafts of the resurrection light. What does that mean to you?

## Notes

### Chapter

- 1 Andrew Harvey, *A Jesus, and Ramakrishna*
- 2 Susan Gillingham, *The Bible Commentaries of D. M. Gunn* (Oxford)

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- 1 John Eaton, *The Psalms* (Continuum, 2005)
- 2 Susan Gillingham, *The Hebrew Bible*, in *The Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001)
- 3 William P. Brown, *The Psalms* (University Press, 2002)
- 4 William P. Brown, *The Psalms: An Overview*