

Good Friday Reflection

MORNING

IT IS FINISHED

Jon Bloom

It is Friday, April 3, A.D. 33. It is the darkest day in human history, though most humans have no clue of this. In Rome, Tiberius attends to the demanding business of the empire.

Throughout the inhabited world, babies are born, people eat and drink, marry and are given in marriage, barter in marketplaces, sail merchant ships, and fight battles. Children play, old women gossip, young men lust, and people die.

But today, one death, one brutal, gruesome death, the worst and best of all human deaths, will leave upon the canvas of human history the darkest brushstroke. In Jerusalem, God the Son, the Creator of all that is (John 1:3), will be executed.

The Garden

The Jewish day dawns with night, and never has it been more fitting, since today the hour has come and the power of darkness (Luke 22:53). Jesus is in Gethsemane, where he has prayed with loud cries and tears, being heard by his Father (Heb. 5:7) whose will will be done. Jesus hears noises and looks up. Torches and hushed voices signal the arrest party's arrival.

Jesus wakes his sleepy friends who are jarred alert at the sight of their brother, Judas, betraying his Rabbi with a kiss. Soldiers and servants encircle Jesus. St Peter, flushed with anger, pulls out his sword and lunges at those nearest Jesus. Malchus flinches, but not enough. Blinding pain and blood surge where his ear had been. Voices speak, but Malchus only hears the screaming wound, which he's grabbed with both hands. He feels a hand touch his hands and the pain vanishes. Under his hands is an ear. Stunned, he looks at Jesus, already being led away. Disciples are scattering. Malchus looks down at his bloody hands.

The Sanhedrin

Jesus is led brusquely into the house of Annas, a former High Priest, who questions him about his teaching. Jesus knows this informal interrogation is meant to catch him disoriented and unguarded. He is neither, and gives this manipulative leader nothing. Rather, he refers Annas to his hearers and is struck with irony by a Jewish officer for showing disrespect. Frustrated, Annas sends Jesus on to his son-in-law Caiaphas, the current High Priest.

At Caiaphas's house the trial gets underway quickly. Morning will come fast. The Council needs a damning verdict by daybreak. The examination proceeds as bleary-eyed Sanhedrin members continue to file in.

The trial has been assembled hastily and witnesses haven't been screened well. Testimonies don't line up. Council members look disconcerted. Jesus is silent as a lamb. Irritated and impatient, Caiaphas cuts to the quick: "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (Matt. 26:63).

The hour has come. Charged in the name of his Father to answer, Jesus speaks the words that seal the doom for which he had come to endure (John 12:27): "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64).

In a moment of law-breaking (Lev. 21:10) politically religious theatre, Caiaphas tears his robes in feigned outrage and thinly concealed relief over Jesus's blasphemy. He declares the trial's end with, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips" (Luke 22:71).

As the sun breaks over Jerusalem's eastern ridge, Judas swings from his own belt, St Peter writhes in the grief of his failure, and Jesus's face is streaked with dried blood and saliva from the pre-dawn sport of the temple police. The Council's verdict: guilty of blasphemy. Their sentence: death. But it's a sentence they cannot carry out. Rome refuses to delegate capital punishment.

The Governor

Pilate's mood, already sour over the Sanhedrin's sudden insistent intrusion so early in the morning, worsens as he grasps the situation. They want him to execute a Galilean "prophet." His seasoned instincts tell him something isn't right. He questions Jesus and then tells the Council, "I find no guilt in this man" (Luke 23:4).

A game of political chess ensues between Pilate and the Sanhedrin, neither realizing that they are pawns, not kings.

Pilate makes a move. As a Galilean, Jesus falls under Herod Antipas's jurisdiction. Let Herod judge. Herod initially receives Jesus happily, hoping to see a miracle. But Jesus refuses to entertain or even respond. Antipas, disappointed, blocks the move by returning Jesus to Pilate.

Pilate makes another move. He offers to release Jesus as this year's annual Passover-pardoned prisoner. The Council blocks the move. "Not this man, but Barabbas!" they cry (John 18:40). Pilate is astounded. The Sanhedrin prefers a thief and murderer to this peasant prophet?

Pilate tries another move. He has Jesus severely flogged and humiliated, hoping to curb the Council's blood thirst. Again the move is blocked when the Council insists that Jesus must be crucified because "he has made himself the Son of God" (John 19:7). Check. Pilate's fear grows. Jesus's divine claim could threaten Rome. Worse, it could be true. Roman deities supposedly could take on human form. His further questioning of Jesus unnerves him.

One last move. Pilate tries to persuade the Sanhedrin to release Jesus. One last block and trap. "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar" (John 19:12). The Council has Pilate where they want him: cornered. Checkmate.

And the triune God has the Council, Pilate, and Satan where he wants them. They would have no authority over the Son at all unless it had been given them from above (John 19:11). Fallen Jews, Gentiles, and spiritual powers unwittingly collaborate in executing the only innocent death that could possibly grant the guilty life. Checkmate.

The Cross

Morning wanes as Jesus stumbles out of the Praetorium, horribly beaten and bleeding profusely. The Roman soldiers had been brutal in their creative cruelty. Thorns have ripped Jesus's scalp, and his back is one grotesque, oozing wound. Golgotha is barely a third of a mile through the Garden Gate, but Jesus has no strength to manage the forty-pound crossbar. Simon of Cyrene is drafted from the crowd.

Twenty-five minutes later, Jesus is hanging in sheer agony on one of the cruellest instruments of torture ever devised. Nails have been driven through his wrists (which we only know about because of the doubt St Thomas will express in a couple days—see John 20:25). A sign above Jesus declares in Greek, Latin, and Aramaic who he is: the King of the Jews.

The King is flanked on either side by thieves and around him are gawkers and mockers. "Let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" some yell (Luke 23:35). One dying thief even joins in the derision. They do not understand that if the King saves himself, their only hope for salvation is lost. Jesus asks his Father to forgive them. The other crucified thief sees a Messiah in the mutilated man beside him, and he asks the Messiah to remember him. Jesus's prayer is beginning to be answered. Hundreds of millions will follow.

It is mid-afternoon now and the eerie darkness that has fallen has everyone on edge. But for Jesus, the darkness is a horror he has never known. This, more than the nails and thorns and lashings, is what made him sweat blood in the garden. The Father's wrath is hitting him in full force. He is in that moment no longer the Blessed, but the Cursed (Gal. 3:13). He has become sin (2 Cor. 5:21). In terrifying isolation, cut off from his Father and all humans, he screams, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*," Aramaic for "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Ps. 22:1). No greater love (John 15:13), humility (Phil. 2:8), or obedience (Heb. 5:8) has ever or will ever be displayed.

St Matthew tells us that shortly after 3:00 P.M., Jesus whispers hoarsely for a drink. In love, he has drained the cup of his Father's wrath to the dregs. He has borne our full curse. There is no debt left to pay, and he has nothing left to give. The wine moistens his mouth just enough to say one final word: "It is finished" (John 19:30). And God the Son dies.

It is the worst and best of all human deaths. For on this tree he bears our sins in his body (1 Pet. 2:24), “the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). And now it is finished.

The Tomb

A bright irony on this darkest of days is that the men who step forward to claim the corpse of the Christ for burial are not family members or disciples. They are members of the Sanhedrin: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. It is one more unexpected thread of grace woven into this tapestry of redemption. They quickly wrap Jesus’s body in a sheet and lay it in a nearby tomb. Evening is falling, and they don’t have time to fully dress it with spices.

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses accompany them, careful to note the tomb’s location. They plan to return with more spices after the Sabbath, on the first day of the week, to make sure that it is finished.

EVENING

WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

Donald Macleod

*At the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice,
“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” (Mark 15:34)*

Up to this point, the narrative of the crucifixion has focused on the physical sufferings of Jesus: the flogging, the crown of thorns, and his immolation on the cross. Six hours have now passed since the nails were driven home. The crowds have jeered, darkness has covered the land, and now, suddenly, after a long silence, comes this anguished cry from the depths of the Saviour’s soul.

The words are an Aramaic-tinged quotation from Psalm 22, and although St Matthew and St Mark both offer a translation for the benefit of Gentile readers, they clearly want us to hear the exact words that Jesus spoke. At his lowest ebb, his mind instinctively breathes the Psalter, and from it he borrows the words that express the anguish, not now of his body, but of his soul. He bore in his soul, wrote Calvin, “the terrible torments of a condemned and lost man.”³ But dare we, on such hallowed ground, seek more clarity?

Against All Hope

There are certainly some very clear negatives. The forsakenness cannot mean, for example, that the eternal communion between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit was broken. God could not cease to be triune.

Neither could it mean that the Father ceased to love the Son: especially not here, and not now, when the Son was offering the greatest tribute of filial piety that the Father had ever received.

Nor again could it mean that the Holy Spirit had ceased to minister to the Son. He had come down upon him at his baptism not merely for one fleeting moment, but to remain on him (John 1:32), and he would be there to the last as the eternal Spirit through whom the Son offered himself to God (Heb. 9:14).

And finally, the words are not a cry of despair. Despair would have been sin. Even in the darkness God was, “My God,” and though there was no sign of him, and though the pain obscured the promises, somewhere in the depths of his soul there remained the assurance that God was holding him. What was true of Abraham was truer still of Jesus: Against all hope, he in hope believed (Rom. 4:18).

Truly Forsaken

Yet, with all these qualifiers, this was a real forsaking. Jesus did not merely *feel* forsaken. He was forsaken; and not only by his disciples, but by God himself. It was the Father who had delivered him up to Judas, to the Jews, to Pilate, and finally to the cross itself.

And now, when he had cried, God had closed his ears. The crowd had not stopped jeering, the demons had not stopped taunting, the pain had not abated. Instead, every circumstance bespoke the anger of God; and there was no countering voice. This time, no word came from heaven to remind him that he

was God's Son, and greatly loved. No dove came down to assure him of the Spirit's presence and ministry. No angel came to strengthen him. No redeemed sinner bowed to thank him.

Bearing the Curse

Who was he? He cries out in Aramaic, but he doesn't use the greatest of all the Aramaic words, *Abba*. Even in the anguish of Gethsemane, distraught and overborne though he was, he had been able to use it (Mark 14:36). But not here.

Like Abraham and Isaac going up to Mount Moriah, he and the Father had gone up to Calvary together. But now *Abba* is not there. Only *El* is there: God All-mighty, God All-holy. And he is before *El*, not now as his Beloved Son, but as the Sin of the World. That is his identity: the character in which he stands before Absolute Integrity.

It is not that he bears some vague relation to sinners. He is one of them, numbered with transgressors. Indeed, he is all of them. He is sin (2 Cor. 5:21), condemned to bear its curse; and he has no cover. None can serve as his advocate.

Nothing can be offered as his expiation. He must bear all, and *El* will not, cannot, spare him till the ransom is paid in full. Will that point ever be reached? What if his mission fails?

The sufferings of his soul, as the old divines used to say, were the soul of his suffering, and into that soul we can see but dimly. Public though the cry was, it expressed the intensely private anguish of a tension between the sin-bearing Son and his heavenly Father: the whirlwind of sin at its most dreadful, God forsaken by God.

His Anguish of Soul

But no less challenging than the torment in Jesus's soul is his question, "Why?"

Is it the why of protest: the cry of the innocent against unjust suffering? The premise is certainly correct. He is innocent. But he has lived his whole life conscious that he is the sin-bearer and has to die as the redemption-price for the many. Has he forgotten that now?

Or is it the why of incomprehension, as if he doesn't understand why he's here? Has he forgotten the eternal covenant? Perhaps. His mind, as a human mind, could not be focused on all the facts at the same time, and for the moment the pain, the divine anger, and the fear of eternal perdition (the cross being God's last word) occupy all his thoughts.

Or is it the why of amazement, as he confronts a dreadfulness he could never have anticipated? He had known from the beginning that he would die a violent death (Mark 2:20), and in Gethsemane he had looked it in the eye, and shuddered. But now he is tasting it in all its bitterness, and the reality is infinitely worse than the prospect.

Never before had anything come between him and his Father, but now the sin of the whole world has come between them, and he is caught in this dreadful vortex of the curse. It is not that *Abba* is not there, but that he is there, as the Judge of all the earth who could condone nothing and could not spare even his own Son (Rom. 8:32).

The Cup Is Drained

Now, Jesus's mind is near the limits of its endurance. We, sitting in the gallery of history, are sure of the outcome. He, suffering in human nature the fury of hell, is not. He is standing where none has stood before or since, enduring at one tiny point in space and in one tiny moment of time, all that sin deserved: the curse in unmitigated concentration.

But then, suddenly, it is over. The sacrifice is complete, the curtain torn, and the way into the Holiest opened once and for all; and now Jesus's joy finds expression in the words of another psalm, Psalm 31:5. In the original, it had not contained the word *Abba*, but Jesus inserts it: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

We have no means of knowing what intervened between the two cries. We know only that the Cup is drained and the curse exhausted, and that the Father now proudly holds out his hands to the spirit of his Beloved Son.