

# UNDERSTANDING CHRIST'S HARD WORDS

# "WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME"

## SPECIAL LENTEN ADDRESSES

1. "HATE YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER" . . . . . Rev. John E. Gelding
2. "I AND THE FATHER ARE ONE" . . . . . Rev. Philip H. E. Thomas
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4. "THE UNFORGIVABLE SIN" . . . . . Rev. Lance R. Shilton
5. "EAT MY FLESH" . . . . . Rev. Anthony G. Tress
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PRICE 10 CENTS EACH



CHRIST'S HARD WORDS  
"WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?"

The Reverend Philip H.E. Thomas, B.A., B.D.

"And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34).

In words of stark simplicity Matthew narrates the fourth of the so-called "words of the Cross". Commentators agree that of all the utterances of that first Good Friday, this is the most difficult to explain; and it comes as a fitting Easter conclusion to this series examining some of the "hard words of Jesus".

There is difficulty in the passage's use of Aramaic, which jolts our normal flow of comprehension, but the far deeper difficulty is in that these words take us to the very heart of the meaning of the Cross, which is the symbol of our faith, and the hope of the world.

Questions of various levels are involved

- What did Jesus say?
- Why did He say it at that time?
- What did those words mean, and more what do they mean here and now?

A PSALM OF DESOLATION.

The answer to the first of these questions is plainly answered. To those who stood watching around the Cross, there was no mystery here. Jesus, as so often in His life, was now in His death taking on His lips the words of the beloved Hebrew Scriptures. The words uttered were those opening one of the best-known of the Psalms (numbered 22 in our collection) and expressing the age-old longing of men of faith that God would somehow demonstrate His power in a time of need. We, who live in the light of the New Testament, see this Psalm to be peculiarly illuminated by the experiences of the Passion story - the parallels, as in verses 16-18, which speak of pierced hands and feet and the division of garments by lot, are unmistakable-

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but the psalmist did not write it as a prophetic commentary on the Gospel record. He had graphically figured the desolation of a man without God. The details of the Psalm are remarkable; but far more remarkable is the fact that the Son of God should identify His condition as that of the 'God-forsaken'.

#### THE JUSTICE OF GOD.

But even the Sunday School child knows there is more to the Cross than heroic resolution. There have been many martyrs, but Jesus was a Saviour. The suffering - both physical and spiritual - was for a purpose. In some way beyond our understanding, the events of the Crucifixion saw a solemn transaction by which Jesus dealt with the sins of the world (I John 2:2; John 1:29; 3:16-17). The Apostle Peter summed up "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God" (I Peter 3:18).

Yet we are begging the question. Granted that the death of Jesus is so central to the work of God's salvation, why at this time beyond all others should the Father's presence be withdrawn from the Lord's consciousness? Surely in this moment of supreme obedience should be found the experience of deepest fellowship?

In the history of the Church, in the experience of most of us as Christians, there is deeply embedded a desire to short-cut the finality of the Cross as the sole basis for our relationship with God. For most this is not any crude attempt to earn God's forgiveness, but the more subtle temptation which suggests that, as Christians, we have not quite got our just deserts. "I've prayed and God hasn't answered." "I've given up this or that, and God hasn't rewarded me." "I've tried but I just don't seem to get anywhere." This insidious bargaining for the goodness of God is something we all do. An understanding of the forsakenness of the Cross provides the solution.

Our difficulty is partly due to a peculiarly modern view of justice. Penal reformers, social workers, magistrates, and all concerned with justice, crime, and punishment are naturally (and very rightly) concerned with justice as a means of deterrent, and reform. This is all well and good, as long as

it is not forgotten that the basis of justice is retribution. Evil must be appropriately atoned. Crime must be punished. Wickedness must receive its own consequences. Of course, even the most liberal-minded of us acknowledge this, as is revealed in the remark "Boiling oil is too good for a fellow like that" .... or more charitably, "He deserves everything he gets."

The Hebrew mind understood this principle of justice well, and we neglect it at our peril. Do you recall how in C.S. Lewis' "That Hideous Strength", the apparently compassionate inversion of re-education for justice became an entrance for the tyranny of evil?

This is the principle which stands behind the Cross. Jesus dealt with the problem of the world's sin by accepting its consequences. He overpowered wickedness by taking upon Himself the appropriate punishment.

Here lies the reason for His forsakenness. We can trace that progressive isolation which spelt out the true agony of the Cross -

- first He was repelled by the people who had gladly heard Him;
- then betrayed by one who called Him Master;
- in the hour of deepest need His closest friends forsook Him;
- He was led to death by the very religious leaders who should most clearly have recognised His authority;
- and now, in the hours of darkness, He is separated from the consciousness of the Father whom He had known and obeyed through every moment of His life. He calls for the first time, not 'Father', but 'God' - and He calls to one whose face is hidden.

As that cry sounded, Jesus Christ was identifying Himself not only with the Psalmist, but more importantly, with us.

#### A MODERN THEME: ALIENATION.

But in what way is it true to say that you or I, or even more the next door neighbour and the person you work with, is



forsaken by God? Of course, we must admit that our isolation is only partial. Even the worst of our experience has some good in it, although again, our very best is somehow mixed with evil. Certainly our world is just shades of grey, but there is ultimately a black and white behind it all. And the final polarising out of our mixed experiences to either heaven or hell, is described in the Bible as union with or separation from the Eternal God.

Even in the meantime the greys of loneliness, frustration, and discord are present realities, symptoms of man's alienation from his world, himself, and his God.

Behind it all is that festering sense of injustice which infects all men. The novelist, Franz Kafka, wrote a paralysing tale which is almost a parable of modern man. The central figure becomes aware that he is charged with some undefined crime, and gives his life seeking a just trial. He longs eventually even to be found guilty if it would resolve his waiting, but he dies unheard and unwanted. How truly this reflects our dilemma. How gross is the threat of insignificance, or the fear of injustice. How insurmountable the guilt which divides us from family, the 'other' generation, or a sense of integrity. In such rare moments of insight we see ourselves as we really are, trapped and alone.

Yet there is a way through. It is not coincidence that as Jesus gives away His life (for such is the literal meaning of Matthew 27:50), another happening is recorded (verse 51): the dividing curtain in the Temple is torn from top to bottom. The symbol and the reality become one - and the barrier between God and man is breached.

Paul speaks of the Cross and says, "For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (I Cor. 5:21). Jesus Christ suffered a punishment that He did not deserve, to gain a salvation that He did not need.

But both Scripture and experience testify that we do. The question which the suffering Saviour, who is now the Risen

Lord, poses for us, is have we found the way through forsakenness, to the fellowship with God which is eternal life?

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### A PRAYER

We are thankful, O Father, that the word from the Cross is a word of Good News. May we gladly enter in to the liberation of those who know their guilt is removed, and they are set free for fellowship with Yourself; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



PSALM 22

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me  
 and art so far from saving me, from heeding my groans?  
 O my God, I cry in the day-time but thou dost not answer,  
 in the night I cry but get no respite.  
 And yet thou art enthroned in holiness,  
 thou art he whose praises Israel sings.  
 In thee our fathers put their trust;  
 they trusted, and thou didst rescue them.  
 Unto thee they cried and were delivered;  
 in thee they trusted and were not put to shame.  
 But I am a worm, not a man,  
 abused by all men, scorned by the people.  
 All who see me jeer at me,  
 make mouths at me and wag their heads:  
 'He threw himself on the Lord for rescue;  
 let the Lord deliver him, for he holds him dear!'  
 But thou art he who drew me from the womb,  
 who laid me at my mother's breast.  
 Upon thee was I cast at birth;  
 from my mother's womb thou hast been my God.  
 Be not far from me,  
 for trouble is near, and I have no helper.  
 A herd of bulls surrounds me,  
 great bulls of Bashan beset me.  
 Ravening and roaring lions  
 open their mouths wide against me.  
 My strength drains away like water  
 and all my bones are loose.  
 My heart has turned to wax and melts within me.  
 My mouth is dry as a potsherd,  
 and my tongue sticks to my jaw;  
 I am laid low in the dust of death.  
 The huntsmen are all about me;  
 a band of ruffians rings me round,  
 and they have hacked off my hands and my feet.  
 I tell my tale of misery,  
 while they look on and gloat.  
 They share out my garments among them

and cast lots for my clothes.  
 But do not remain so far away, O Lord;  
 O my help, hasten to my aid.

(New English Bible)



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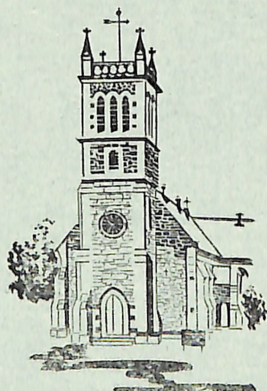
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