Good Friday

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’My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

In his black hole under Beirut, Brian Keenan, the British man who was taken hostage in…..described how he felt ‘bereft of God’. He wrote:

I am full with nothing. My prayers rebound on me as if all those words that I sent up were poured back upon me like an avalanche tumbling around me. I am bereft even of God. My own words become bricks and stones that bruise me. I have been lifted up and emptied out. I am a bag of flesh and scape, a heap of offal tossed unwanted in the corner of this filthy room.

And as I read those words from Brian Keenan some of us will have found our thoughts turned to other places - Ukraine but also so many other parts of the world - where people are experiencing similar kinds of torture and feelings of bereftness.

Few of us will have experienced this kind of desolation ourselves, but there may have been moments when we fear to be swallowed up by the void, and when our lives appeared to be without sense of meaning and we’re not sure where God has gone.

A quick glance at the headlines in the world news section of the newspaper tells me that: Chile has announced unprecedented plans to ration water as the drought enters its 13th year. Violence is raging in Palestine and Israel. Dozens have been killed in the Philippines due to landslides and floods. Women are facing chronic violence in Syria’s widow camps. Sri Lanka is nearly out of medicine as doctors are warning that the country’s economic crisis threatens a greater number of deaths than covid. Covid still dominates people’s lives in so many parts of the world. And Putin’s war in Ukraine continues to rage whilst increasingly horrific and terrifying accounts of war crimes committed emerge.

It feels pretty dark. It feels quite forsaken.

I received a text message from a friend this week who is not a Christian himself. He was wishing me a happy Palm Sunday and then wrote: ‘I had hoped that Jesus’ suffering and sacrifice for humankind would have counted for something in reducing the brutality and suffering being seen in the world today’.

Someone asks us where is God now and we may be terrified by finding we have nothing to say.

If I’m honest, part of me feels very grateful for Good Friday this year, because it gives us time to be hopeless, or anxious or fearful or devastated or any of the other feelings of despair we may have. We don’t need to put on a brave face and say it’s alright really and pretend to be all jolly. Not today.

It’s one of the reasons I am a Christian. Ours is not a faith that whitewashes over the dreadful ghastliness of our world and of human nature. It steps right into it.

This is our faith: real and honest. It is a faith that puts right in the middle of everything a man who ordinary people welcomed as a hero and hailed as a king, only five days later to shout crucify him. A leader whose efforts at building a community appear to have collapsed. His friend Judas has sold him, his friend Peter has betrayed him, his other friends have fled in terror and left him to be tortured and brutalised.

This is our faith: it acknowledges that we all have times when it hurts so much we don’t know how we’re going to go on.

And what does Jesus pray in that moment of betrayal and aloneness? Father, forgive them.

This is our faith: that person, who has been utterly destroyed by his fellow human beings, still summons the courage to pray for them and that God would forgive them.

This is our honest faith: the central figure, the one who is supposed to be the hero is himself doubtful, wishing he could avoid the horrors that await him, wondering what the point was of anything.

This is our faith: even the son of God starts to feel that God has abandoned him.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And yet, in this moment of forsakeness, in the darkness of Good Friday and the darkness of our world, there is hope.

We are not yet at Easter Day celebrating that God has conquered death forever.

But even today, there is hope. So on Good Friday where is the hope?

Today, hope comes through Emmanuel. God With Us.

Many of you will be familiar with the writing of Elie Wiesel. He wrote about the hangings he witnessed at Auschwitz. As he was forced to walk past the gallows here a child had been hung between two adults Wiesel heard a voice cry out: where is God, where is he? Elie Wiesel writes: “I heard a voice within me answer him: Where is He? He is - He is hanging here on this gallows.”

Hope comes from the fact that God is there too - in the lives of those who have been crushed by war, or by natural disaster, or economic crisis, or the countless ways in which human beings abuse one another. Rachel Mann is a priest and poet I admire. She has written about her own struggles with the darkness brought on by chronic illness. She is no stranger to feelings of total despair at her own weakness and vulnerability. For Rachel hope is not suddenly believing that God will heal her of her illness. Hope, she writes, “is seeking to trust in the company of the suffering God. when I fell further into the pit, God would fall with me’.

Where is God today? God is in all those darkest places with the suffering of the world. God is right there. And when those who have fallen, fall even further, God will fall with them.

I don’t think today is a day for lots of clever answers explaining the problem of evil and the existence of God. We may not be able to explain why there seem to be so many crises in our world this Easter. We may not be able to find the confidence to say that everything will be fine by Sunday.

Today is a day for gazing at the Cross and if we hear ourselves uttering the words of anguish: my God, my God why have you forsaken me? we remember that on the Cross Jesus made them his own. And he is our hope: Emmanuel.

All we can do is be there and trust that God is there too.