

6<sup>th</sup> March 2021

## Forsaken

**“The most extreme agony is to feel that one has been utterly forsaken.”**

*Bruno Bettelheim, Surviving and Other Essays*

Among the most powerful verses of Scripture is the heart-rending cry of the psalmist at the beginning of Psalm 22:

*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*

And this was the anguished wail of suffering and pain of Jesus' torment on the Cross: *Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthanei.*

The expression in English ends with a question-mark, rendering it a query to the hearer. But this is clearly a cry of suffering which, though in question form, has no answer. Indeed, I cannot believe that an answer was expected by the Psalmist or by Jesus himself. This scream of agony could never have an unequivocal answered response. The Psalmist's words – perhaps above all others in the Bible – express, as Bruno Bettelheim puts it, “the most extreme agony ... that one has been utterly forsaken.”

Here is the Psalmist in the utter despair of forsakenness. Here is Jesus, taking familiar words fully to himself, expressing his humanity more than at any other time in his ministry. Here, close to death, our Lord felt completely alone. And with such forsakenness compounded by a belief that God had abandoned him, how powerful the cry becomes.

Rembrandt's paining, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, had a powerful effect on me when I saw it. For in it, unconditional love is shown by a father's hands resting in blessing on the son who kneels before him. It's a love of which Henri Nouwen writes so movingly in his book of the same name. For this is the antithesis of desertion, the counter to abandonment. Here is welcome and acceptance, with no attempted response in words to the pleas of a broken man. Here is forgiveness and grace, love's response to forsakenness.

People still cry, “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?” Where is the blessing of welcome and acceptance? Might we be part of the offering of unconditional love to people who feel forsaken now?

### **A prayer for today**

*Allow me to say I am forsaken, for that is how I feel.*

*Allow me to know acceptance and welcome, for that is what I need. Amen*

*An original reflection by © Tom Gordon*

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