

"Those Who Deserted Him"
Matthew 27:45-46

April 18, 2014

Good Friday

Death can be a very unpleasant experience. It is often preceded by a great deal of pain and suffering. Death can also be a very lonely experience. Even if there are many people in the room at someone's death bed, that person experiences death by himself. Imagine how much harder it would be if there were no people at a death bed and one literally died all alone.

Jesus' death, which we have gathered together this evening to commemorate and contemplate, was very painful. He had been beaten and scourged before being brought to Golgotha. At Golgotha, He had nails driven through His hands and a long spike driven through His feet. Crucifixion was intended by Rome to inflict the utmost pain upon the worst criminals as a deterrent against future crime. Jesus was experiencing the utmost pain.

Jesus' death was also very lonely. Sure, there were a few faithful women and John, the beloved disciple, standing there with the four soldier Roman crucifixion team. But all the fair weather followers who had followed Him in order to be fed and healed were nowhere in sight. His "loyal" disciples, who promised they would never leave Jesus, even if they had to die, all left Him, too. Judas had betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver before hanging himself. Peter had denied knowing Him, not once or twice, but three times. The rest of the disciples, when they encountered the threat of arrest or worse in the garden, all fled, never to reappear in the Good Friday story. Even Jesus' enemies eventually gave up their mocking and left. Jesus was truly alone.

We may feel pity for Jesus or scorn for His disciples, but we play a part in this also. We are sinners. This is evident when we honestly evaluate our actions according to the Word of God and not according to our self-made standard and without trying to make excuses or justify our actions. Our status as sinners is clearly seen when we become old and die. Death, the Bible says, is the wages – the reward, if you will – for our sin.

Sin, by its very definition, causes us to fall short of the glory of God. Sin, therefore, separates us from God. That gulf between God and us grows wider and deeper with every sin. Every single time you do what God forbids, you get farther away from God. Every single time you fail to do what God commands, you get farther from God. As we see Jesus, true man and true God, hanging on the cross, it could be said that WE, too, have left Jesus because of our sin. We are far from Him, not only in time and space, but in spirit, as well.

So, Jesus' closest friends and disciples have left Him to die. Jesus' enemies have left Him to die. You and I and all who have ever lived have left Him to die. That's not all. That's not even the worst of it. There is One nearer and dearer to Jesus who leaves Him and deserts Him. Jesus senses this and, in the only time out of the seven times He spoke, He cries out in fear, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We think that Jesus' suffering on the cross had to do with nails being pounded into hands, a spike being pounded into feet, and so on, but that suffering is nothing compared with this suffering: the Father abandons His only begotten Son.

How could God do this to Jesus? How could the Father desert His Son in the time of His utmost need? Christians have pondered this great mystery for centuries. As we've said, the only thing that can separate us from God is sin and Jesus was the spotless Lamb of God who had no sin, by nature or by action.

But God, out of His great love and desire to rescue us from what we deserve because of our sin, "made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us." (1 Cor. 5:21) God, in His holiness, would have to reject us and keep us out of His presence for all eternity because of our sin. Instead, He relieved us of all sin – sins of doing wrong, sins of failing to do what is right, sins of thought, word, and deed – and put them on Jesus. And not only did God do that for us, but He did it for everyone who has lived, who is alive now, or ever will live. So great was this imposition of sin upon Jesus that the Bible says He was made to BE sin.

When a holy and righteous God viewed this – the sin of all time upon Jesus, He had no choice. He turned away. God the Father left, deserted, and abandoned His only Son, the One whom He loved and in whom He was well pleased. This is hell. We think suffering in hell is all about eternal fire and darkness. That’s nothing compared with this. Hell is being outside the presence of God and apart from Him. Even in our darkest times on earth, we are still in God’s presence. No wonder Jesus cried out in terror, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He was now, for the first time in all eternity, outside the presence of His Father and apart from Him. He was experiencing hell.

We know why God that Father had to turn away from His Son, but why did Jesus submit Himself to this terror beyond our imagination? Jesus voluntarily and willingly did this for you – for me. Jesus was changed that we might be changed. As the Scriptures say, “God made [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us.” It goes on to say, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” By removing sin and its guilt from us, we have been changed in our essence. We are no longer sin. We are the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus. When God looks at you now, He does not see your sin, no matter how dark it is or how much it is. He sees only the righteousness of Christ covering you like a pure white robe.

Jesus’ location was changed so that our location would be changed as well. By Jesus being separated from His Father, we have been brought back to God who is now our Heavenly Father as well. God left Jesus so that He could bring us back to Himself. God punished Jesus in this way so that He would never have to punish us. God turned away from Jesus in disgust for a moment so that He could embrace us in love for all eternity.

Many people think that that a Good Friday service is to be seen as a sort of “funeral service for Jesus” in which we feel sad and pity Jesus in His suffering. Nothing could be further from the truth. Despite the reverent, even somber, tone of the service, this is a service of joy, not sadness. Our sin and its guilt and punishment have been accounted for by Jesus and removed from us this day. Death, the product of sin, is overcome and defeated. What could be more joyful?

There is no need to pity Jesus for His suffering. Rather, with awe and the deepest of gratitude, we worship Him for His amazing love which would move Him to willingly undergo flogging, beating, ridicule, rejection, crucifixion and hell itself by being deserted by His Father. Jesus didn't pity Himself. Shortly after the terror of His separation from Father, He boldly proclaimed, "It is finished! – It is accomplished!" now that He had gone through hell. Everything that needed to be accomplished for our eternal salvation had been accomplished. He then calmly commended His spirit into His Father's loving hands and died. Sin, death, and hell are due us. Sin, death, and hell are experienced and overcome by Him. And that is why, for us and all of humanity, this is GOOD Friday. Amen.