

13 April 2014

It was a fairly desperate cry from the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' We know it is an essential part of the Palm Sunday/Holy Week story that our ears have perhaps become accustomed to the phrase and therefore does not surprise us anymore. But it should surprise us because there is a desperation, a raw human depth, in the dying words of Jesus on the cross. Jesus has been betrayed by his closest friends and collaborators. His chosen disciples have abandoned him and become weak at the first sign of threat. They have fallen asleep, they have fallen away and the worst form of betrayal was at the table where friendship and loyalty should be the strongest. Instead, as we know Judas Iscariot, first eats with Jesus and then betrays him. Now in this scene of his public trial, the mob, the pack mentality, screams at the top of their voices, 'We want Barabbas. Let Jesus be crucified'. Jesus was mocked, he was scourged, he was humiliated. But that's not why he has this desperation in his voice.

There is a desperation in his voice because Jesus now feels abandoned and betrayed by the one he thought he could trust; the Father who sent him to announce Good News. Surely he could count on his Father? Surely the Father would never abandon him? Surely the Father would allow his Son to pass over this moment of suffering and totally avoid the reality of death? Jesus must die as the scriptures foretold, Jesus cannot avoid this moment and yet the Father will continue to love the Son even in death. But the cry of Jesus is real, the cry of Jesus is raw, the cry of Jesus is the cry of all today who feel that same sense of abandonment and fear, those who are suffering, those who are dying, those who feel alone. The cry of Jesus on the cross represents the cry of all humanity yearning to be saved, yearning to be free.

Last Monday in Syria, Dutch Jesuit priest Fr Frans Van del Lugt was shot dead after spending 50 years of his life working with the poor and homeless and seeking to bring dialogue among Christians and Muslims. He had the chance to escape danger but stayed with his people until the end. Fr Van del Lugt did not flee. Surely he must have felt abandoned by God, under threat, desperate in his final moments? But quietly and calmly he made a remarkable act of faith and remained until the end to face certain death. He we see death not as a tragic waste of life but

wonderfully transformative, a remarkable story of faith, hope and trust. Look to the cross of Jesus and see that same wonderfully transformative event, a remarkable story of faith, hope and trust.

In today's second reading, St Paul reminds us that Jesus emptied himself, he gave the total gift of himself. And from that death and human desperation, God raised him on high and we rejoice in that gift of eternal life, the joy of the resurrection. That's what gathers us here today, that's what leads us in faith not just into this most solemn and holy week of the Christian calendar, but into the joys and struggles, the ups and downs, the challenges and dramas of daily life, your life and mine, your family and my family, the story of the Church and the world. Holy Week reminds us that whatever suffering or hardship we face, God is there to hold us, to love us, to heal us and to set us free. If we do not see with the eyes of faith, then the death of Jesus has no meaning.

This is the death we celebrate.  
This is the new life we proclaim.  
This is the vision we await.