

The Seven Last Words of Christ
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The FOURTH

“I have been one acquainted with the night.”

“And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.”

Robert Frost wrote the line of poetry; St. Mark the gospel. I was reminded of the Frost poem one night when I was out walking myself, brooding over the fourth of these seven last words. “And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

It is a passing strange cry coming from the only Son of God, the second of the Triune Persons. Any commentary will tell you that what Jesus is reciting is the first line of Psalm 22. This prophetic psalm makes five different allusions to the experience of Jesus during his passion. For example, “They have pierced my hands and my feet, they have numbered all my bones.” Jesus, commentators tell us, uses this psalm to interpret his own experience.

All well and good in a dis-passionate, academic sort of way, nevertheless, what we have wrenched, from this body crucified, is the terrible cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The cry of one utterly desolate.

It strikes me that if we are to gain the hint of an explanation for this cry, we need to hear it in its gospel context: “And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.” What darkness are we faced with here? Not the darkness of a solar eclipse, the commentators rule that out, although an eclipse of the sun and the death of the Son of the

creating God would have been a worthy cosmic phenomenon. So, no eclipse. What then?

We have all had the experience of looking out, as a storm approaches, and seeing black clouds building up in the west, clouds full of snow or rain, clouds that ultimately blot out the sun and plunge us into a weird twilight. That is a real possibility for Good Friday and may well have happened. But the two verses, read together, make it look as though the darkness were almost producing the cry or, at least, that they are an indication of the darkening spirit of Christ.

We have all had the experience (I would suspect) of looking into ourselves and discovering a darkness that obscures the light of faith, that contradicts previous experience, and that tests our adherence to the living God. In spite of the fact that this takes place in broad daylight, St. John of the Cross calls it the “dark night of the soul,” depending on its length, its depth, its intensity. It might be presumptuous of us to label any of our experiences the “dark night of the soul,” but at times the direction is clear.

We remind ourselves then, that Our Lord was a human being, the Son of God incarnate, who experienced the world just as we do, and who put his experience into words just as we must.

Furthermore, this experience of Jesus, as though all consolation had been drained out of the all-consoling Son of God, is part of the cost of our redemption. The cost is not a price that the Father assigns, “If you undertake to redeem the world you must pay such and such an enormous price.” Rather, it arises from the very nature of the fallen world itself, precisely because it is fallen. Just let me quote one sentence from *The Idea of the Holy* by Rudolf Otto: “...in His life, suffering, and death is repeated in classic and ultimate form that most mystical of all the problems of the Old

Covenant, the problem of *the guiltless suffering of the righteous*, which re-echoes again and again so mysteriously from Jeremiah and deuterio-Isaiah on through Job and the Psalms.” [172, 73]

We can knock our heads against paradox until they are black and blue; we can fail to explain the inexplicable, only to find that our hearts remain unmoved. But by now we have seen most of the pieces of the puzzle^{of life} and recognize that there will always be one missing. We can guess at its shape and its colors because we know where it belongs, between the iniquity of sin and the holiness of God. Far better simply to gaze on him whom we have pierced and ask, “for grief, deep feelings and confusion because it is for our sins that the Lord is going to his Passion.”

If in no other way, in this way we too will draw close and, in the company of Jesus, become ones “who have been acquainted with the night.”