

A Lamp in the Darkness
Matthew 27:45-47, Luke 23:34-35, 46; John 19:28-30
April 5, 2009

Mother Teresa's ministry among the "poorest of the poor" is well-known. During a retreat in 1946, she experienced God's call to enter the Calcutta slums. With only the clothes she was wearing and five rupees, she began establishing communities amid the poverty-stricken in countries around the globe. Within forty years, her Missionaries of Charity were in seventy-seven countries, with over 350 communities involving thousands of sisters. In 1979, a Nobel Peace Prize was awarded her. After her death in 1997 at age eighty-seven, a ground swell of support led to her beatification in 2003.

Only recently has her inner spiritual pilgrimage been made public through private letters, journaling, and conversations. Shortly after beginning her work with the poor, she experienced a "terrible sense of loss," a "deep inner darkness." This emptiness increased not so much in intensity but in the spiritual exhaustion effected by its unrelenting persistence. In her writings, she uses these phrases to describe her agony: "untold darkness," "terrible loneliness," "utter forsakenness," "inexplicable brokenness," "abandonment."

Before entering the slums she had known a deep union with God. But soon afterward she felt like a lover abandoned, forced to endure "the tortures of loneliness" as her only "traveling companion." She once said, "If I ever become a Saint I will surely be one of 'darkness.' I will continually be absent from Heaven—to light the light of those in darkness on earth."ⁱ

In the absence of an intimate relationship with God, Mother Teresa cultivated a deep identification with Jesus. In his passion Jesus experienced similar abandonment from his Father. This morning we have heard some of the prayers he uttered in the darkness of the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He suffered the agony of rejection, just as Mother Teresa did, and just as the world's unwanted and destitute do.

But this was not the only cry he made. Luke tells us that, in spite of the deep agony of rejection and pain he felt, Jesus made a leap of faith. His final words were a statement of faith in spite of the abandonment he felt. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Today we hear these prayers from the cross as we continue our exploration of prayer. As there was for Jesus, in our lives there are sometimes season of darkness when God feels absent. Some are like Mother Teresa in that theirs is a spirituality of darkness, in which God's abandonment feels permanent. Jesus' prayers instruct us in how we might pray in seasons of darkness.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is a cry of agony. It is wail of desperation from a psalm of lament (Ps. 22:1). In this prayer Jesus empathizes with his people and the circumstances that nail them to crosses of loneliness, loss, abandonment, and abuse. This God knows how it feels to be a victim, for on the cross he chose to become the victim. Jesus knows what it is to be separated from human compassion and to feel abandoned by God.

There is no escape from the problems of pain and suffering. There are no answers to the nagging question, “Why?” But in the cross there is the promise that we will never suffer alone. God through Jesus has experienced what it feels like to be rejected, threatened, ridiculed, and beaten. God can relate to our feelings of utter desolation.

In one of his novels about the Holocaust, Eli Wiesel tells how the SS hung two Jewish men and a boy before the assembled inhabitants of the concentration camp. The men died quickly but the death struggle of the boy lasted half an hour. “Where is God? Where is he?” a man behind me asked. After a long time the boy was still in agony on the rope. I heard the man cry again, “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer, “Where is He? Here God is—He is hanging here on this gallows....”ⁱⁱ

God rarely intervenes to extract us from painful circumstances, but God always abides with us throughout our pain and suffering. In Jesus, God says to us, “Your suffering matters more than my own.” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus could curse his disciples for abandoning him in the garden at his hour of need. He could curse the soldiers who nailed him to the cross. He could curse the bystanders who ridiculed him. By “cursing” I mean asking God to give someone what he deserves. Jesus could pray for the punishment of his enemies.

Yet on the cross Jesus curses no one. Not the disciples nor the soldiers nor the crowds. On the cross Jesus suffers the sin of his people. His prayer is not for their punishment, but rather for their forgiveness. “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” Jesus calls upon God to forgive those who gather to kill God’s Son.

In these days of high stress and low patience, it is easy for us to curse the driver who cuts in front of us without looking, the clerk who forgets to calculate the discount, the child who breaks something valuable. Jesus teaches us not to curse those who hurt us, but to seek to understand the brokenness from which they act and to forgive them. If we find ourselves unable to forgive another, Christ’s example suggests that we take the first step by seeking God’s forgiveness. This is

a way of seeking God's grace to intervene for us, to prepare us for the time when we can forgive. "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

Near the ninth hour of the day, the high priest at the temple begins the prayer for the evening Passover sacrifice: "Into your hands I give my spirit" (Ps. 31:5). This is a phrase from a psalm of deliverance. At the same moment, on the cross, Jesus prays, "Father, into your hands I give my spirit." Even in the midst of agony and abandonment, Jesus continues to call God "Father." Jesus never gives up on his Father's love. He trusts God with "ruthless trust."ⁱⁱⁱ

What is ruthless trust? It is refusing to give up on God's love for humanity, even when God feels absent. It is Jacob wrestling with the angel saying, "I will not let you go until you bless me" (Gen. 32:26). It is Job crying out, "God may kill me, but still I will trust him" (Job 13:15a CEV).

In this act of trust, Jesus hints that God's work is far from over. His prayer of commendation leaves open the door for God to act. This is not a prayer of resignation, but of radical hope. Jesus trusts that not only the past and present, but also the future are in God's hands.

Ruthless trust inspires us to accept the spiritual darkness that envelops us, the uncertain path forward, the nagging pain, and to pray from the heart, "God into your hands I entrust my body, mind, and spirit. Whatever your will for me, may it be done. I trust you with all that I am."

What of us? How much do we trust God? Do we entrust not only our past and present, but also our unknown future into the hands of God? Do we believe that God's work is far from over, that God will continue to craft new creations and to summon life out of death? In whatever way life unfolds for us, God's hands will always be there to beckon us forward, to lift us up when we fall, to stroke us when we need assurance and comfort. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

"It is finished." Lifted up on the cross, Jesus has completed the work God has given him to do: to reveal the very essence of God. Here on the cross Jesus displays the suffering love of a vulnerable God. It is not the political Messiah people had expected; Jesus is the suffering Messiah who identifies with people in their pain and suffering. In his death, he completes his earthly ministry of revealing the nature of our forgiving, suffering, loving, grace-giving God.

This prayer is one of completion opening the future to the remarkable work of God in Easter and to the empowering work of the Spirit on Pentecost. Completion brings closure, and endings bring new beginnings. For each of us there are seasons when one stage in life ends and a new stage begins. We can trust that God is at work in the midst of all the changing seasons of life. "It is finished."

In his hour of deepest darkness, Jesus is sustained by prayer. The prayer of desolation and abandonment. The prayer seeking God's forgiveness. A prayer of ruthless trust in God in spite of loneliness. A prayer of completion trusting in the new beginnings God will provide. In the depths of suffering, Jesus does not give up on God. He continues to reach out in trust, to bridge the gap that he feels separates him from God. Prayer is a lamp shedding light upon his darkness.

In the hours of darkness that cast shadows upon our lives, may we cling to prayer as a source of strength and hope, a lamp glowing in the nighttime of distress. We may be pleasantly surprised to find not only Jesus, but also the Blessed Mother Teresa, sharing our pain close by our side!

Majestic God, we come this morning heralding your presence in Jesus of Nazareth. He emulates your grace and justice, setting right that which has been wronged, and uplifting those who have been downtrodden.

We revere Jesus, and yet, as those long ago, sometimes we turn against him. We rebel at his way and we fail to live up to his standard. We confess that sometimes when we feel your absence, it is we who have distanced ourselves from you. Forgive us, O God. Lead us in the paths of righteousness.

You know us inside and out. You are aware of the shadows that cast darkness upon our lives, making us fearful and distraught. Help us to find an anchor in prayer, in turning toward you for our welfare, in lifting our face toward your Sonlight.

Shed a glimmer of hope in the darkness of many who are anxious about their livelihoods, about food for their families, about money to make the mortgage. Beam your rays into lives which have fallen into the pit of despair, who have wandered off onto harmful pathways. Surround them with your presence, O God.

We pray for renewed strength for those who are ill. Be present with those care for loved ones, offering them newfound energy for their ministry.

We offer ourselves to you, this Holy Week, promising to walk close to Jesus, sharing the agony of the world, and awaiting the new life you bring. In his name we pray. Amen.

ⁱ W. Paul Jones, "Toward a Post-Christian Spirituality," *Weavings*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, January/February 2009, pp. 8-13. His primary resource is *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light—The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*, ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk, MC (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

ⁱⁱ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), pp. 61-62.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust: The Ragamuffin's Path to God*, pp. 11-12. Quoted by Timothy Paul Jones, *Prayers Jesus Prayed* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Publications, 2002), p. 152.