

Sermon on Psalm 22, Good Friday, March 25th 2016
Christ Church Lutheran, Pastor Helge Voigt

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come. Amen.

Let us pray for the blessing of the word in silence.

...

God may give us a word for our heart and a heart for his word. Amen.

Dear beloved people of God,

Today, we remember Christ's passion and death. This is an important day, although it is connected with rather disagreeable feelings. Who wants to think of death? Not many of us.

Let me invite you first to the castle church in my hometown, Leipzig. We live beside an 800-year-old tiny village church. Every morning we start the new day with the sound of its bell. If we'd now enter the church which holds around 100 people, we'd see an altarpiece of the late Middle Ages, the time before the Reformation. It was made around 1460 in honor of Mary, the mother of Jesus. March 25th, today, is the feast of Annunciation since the church celebrates it 9 months before Christmas Day. Because of Good Friday that feast has been moved to next Monday this year. But we also could think of the very beginning of Jesus incarnation and its awful end today. It started with the outstanding message of the angel, that Mary would become pregnant. Moved by the Holy Spirit Mary received Jesus. Let's start this Good Friday sermon with a mental picture of the altarpiece of Holy Mary in Lützschen's Schloßkirche, the castle church.



In this painting, we see an old woman who lies dying. It was painted as a picture of how to pass away. Sudden and early death was terrible to the people of the Middle Age. Another terrible death was to die as a criminal through execution. The good way to die is shown on the altarpiece instead. Mary lies on her deathbed in the midst of the trusted Apostles, familiar to her. Their presence fills the room. The peace of this painting communicates itself to you. It is impressive how the disciples turn to this dying woman with attentive and loving eyes. They do not stare, but they bring along comfort and deep faith. One holds a lighted candle in his hand, another sacred water, one is writing, many of them pray. One listens. Mary seems very peaceful. She simply lies there. It appears she may be praying as is written in Psalm 22 (22-27): “I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you ... For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him ... The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever! All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.”

Such a peaceful death wasn't determined in advance for Jesus. Instead it was a death we all fear. Terrible torture full of mockery and shame, pain and suffering.

“Here is the man!” (John 19, 5) That's what Pilate says after torturing him. And in spite of everything Jesus preserved his human dignity. Facing death he endures unjust authority and force. He is at the end of his own power. He suffers. But he does not let anger and rage control him. Jesus remains peaceful in a most fascinating way. Even now, his is the way of compassion and care, that which unlocks the door of heaven. “Here is the man!”

Jesus, Son of Man, son of Mary, cries out loud: “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Marc 15, 34) We listen to his voice on the cross. This kind of death is fearful. Displayed to all. Naked. Tortured. Surrounded by mockers and curious people. Friends at a distance.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It is again a line taken from Psalm 22. A Jewish prayer. Well known not only to Jesus. Jesus prays in this deathly hour with words of his tradition of faith. The honesty is impressive to me. Those who pray Psalm 22 show their desperate feelings and helplessness. It is a kind of confession of the absence of God. Nobody can help anymore. Jesus quotes Psalm 22. And further it says:

“But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
⁷ All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
⁸ Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights! ...

But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid! ...
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

What a paradoxical power is in these words of the psalm. Those who pray that way are complaining to God. But God seems not to be present in great suffering. But still she or he hopes for the power of the Highest. What a woman, what a man. What a persistent and forbearing faith.

The reality of Good Friday says:
All that is awful is here made visible.
Brutal human force is recognizable.
Pain is evident.

But there is God on the cross.

We confess God's presence in the midst of pain and death. The reason is God's all inclusive love for us. Jesus' cry: "Why have you forsaken me?" is very important to me. It shows his human nature. He became doubting and suffering like us. Simultaneously he is God's presence himself.

It's a mystery. God is there even in the cry of helplessness. Within the suffering it is hard to believe in the presence of God and in his human kindness. It is the cry on the cross that shows more. Jesus addresses God as if God is not there. But since Jesus is God's only Son he is there within his own cry.

Good Friday gives us the chance to understand how God cares for us. It's not just pure and challenging realism, but a day with a deeply caring and grounded message. Women and men die. Not all of us are supposed to pass away their earthly life in peace surrounded by friends like we've heard Mary was pictured on the old altarpiece. Just a few can close their eyes within a group of trusted friends or family.

I felt the power of the message of the cross when people are in need of pastoral care. God is there, not far from us but near. He is within the cry in Brussels, Paris, in Homs or Damascus. He is the cry in hospitals and in the poorer quarters of our one world. Your pain is his pain even if you can't believe in God anymore.

But the cross and death should not be the last message in someone's life. We are so much more. Creatures with hope and love, with a deeply based peace and at least with the joy of heaven. Our dignity is in God. Death cannot take it away.

Psalm 22 brings up the cry: „**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?**” (Vers 2) but also: “**But you, O LORD, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid**“ (Vers 19) and finally: „**From you comes my praise in the great congregation**” (Vers 26)

It is movement from complaint to plea and further to praise. Stronger than all, even the death of Jesus Christ is God's promise of human kindness. It is a mystery filled with power for us. Amen.

And the peace of God, surpassing all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.