

Forsaken

Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35

Many years ago I helped a young man organise the funeral of his mother. She had been an elder in my church, had worked all her life as a nurse. The young man's father had died some years before. As we sat in a room, trying to talk about the funeral plans, he suddenly looked at me; his eyes filled with tears, and said, "I'm an orphan now. I've never felt so alone in my life."

Forsaken.

Many years ago a university friend who'd been in a relationship for years suddenly discovered that the relationship was no longer working. No violence. No cruelty. Just that numbing awareness that it was no longer working and things had become very, very cold. They had never married. She left with next to nothing, and bravely decided to start all over again.

Forsaken.

I think of a widow. Family all grown up. Not totally uncaring but undoubtedly distant physically and emotionally. She developed cancer. Because she had kept herself to herself for so many years, in her time of need, there wasn't, she felt, anyone she could really turn to for help.

Forsaken.

I think of a prominent man who had it all. Family, friends, position, wealth. Scandal engulfed his business, and one by one everyone and everything fell away. I saw him at a public event some time later. Those who had once fawned on him now turned away, or looked right through him. Innocent or guilty, no-one wanted to know him or be with him. Shoulders bowed he left the room. Forsaken.

Forsaken. Abandoned; given up; renounced. It is one of the bleakest words in the English language. We see blasted heaths, and desolate deserts. Forsaken. We see cities and towns in Syria, where a drone flies through the bomb-blasted streets, ripped apart, abandoned, desolate.

Forsaken.

The Beatles sang in 1966 about Eleanor Rigby, and Father McKenzie about all the lonely people, “where do they all come from?” The song is described as a lament for lonely people, a commentary on post-modern Britain. Forsaken.

In 2009 the body of a woman was eventually discovered in her flat, five years after her death. People had noticed, briefly, that she hadn't been seen for a while, but didn't think much of it, and soon forgot. Forsaken.

We live in a world where many people feel forsaken. Cut off; isolated; passed over; forgotten. Sometimes it happens quickly, sometimes it creeps up. Our desire for independence and self-determination will have a dangerous and desolate harvest.

What is to be done? Can what has been called the epidemic of loneliness be addressed? Are many doomed to be forsaken, either because of choices they have made, or because of circumstances like war, or natural disaster, or fleeing from terror have splintered families and communities?

Jesus, travelling towards Jerusalem, notes for Him one of the causes of being forsaken. The disappointment and heartbreak He had about people who had somehow forgotten or drifted away from God. Perhaps even a premonition that He Himself would be abandoned by friends in His own time, and cry out from the cross, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” When it comes to understanding the plight of people cut off, abandoned, pushed away, Jesus knows; He understands.

It is not what He believes God to be. He knows that, even in times when the feelings of isolation and forsakenness are greatest, it need not end like that, or be like that. Throughout His life Jesus reaches out again and again to the forsaken ones. From the shepherds who were present around the time He was born; to the women who were not seen as clean or fit for society; to the lepers shunned by families and friends and neighbours; to the people with poor mental health, thought to be possessed by demons, and edged out of town. Even the city of Jerusalem, seemingly driving by its own volition a wedge between itself and the God of hope

and love by killing prophets and stoning people sent to help and bless them; even Jerusalem would, in time, be ushered back from its forsakenness.

God does not want individuals, or communities, or cities, or nations, to be forsaken. Where choice or circumstance permits or forces people to be forsaken, God's "passionate dream, compassionate desire, and bold determination is to gather Her human children closer and closer to Her embrace and love. That mission and commitment is at the centre of Jesus' work. Like a mother hen (note the feminine image), God seeks to draw, embrace, include and welcome God's children into the family of humanity that God has intended from the dawn of Eden itself."ⁱ

The passage from Luke's gospel is about many different things, of course. In the face of public and private stories about what people are facing, it is that word 'desolate' that jumps out. Jesus saw that the 'house' of Jerusalem was forsaken. But it is not a final judgement. God does not wish Her children, any of them, to be lost.

God will be seen again, in the One Who was forsaken on the cross, but Who returned.

Returned for the lost and the lonely. Returned for the bereaved and the broken. Returned for the ostracised and the marginalised. Returned for the doubters and those feeling unworthy. Returned for the forgotten and the disappeared. Returned for the lonely and the isolated, and bereaved.

This is the promise of the Good News of Jesus. This is the promise of the God of the Psalms Who inspired David to sing in the dark times, "forsake me not...I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living....be strong, and let your heart take courage...wait for the Lord..."

Someone commented to me recently about the awfulness of the news. The Zika outbreak in Brazil where babies are born with deformities after their mothers have been bitten by mosquitos. The Syrian refugee crisis, and the camps, and the starving survivors in Syrian cities who have not fled. The floods in our own country leaving whole communities devastated. It is a picture of

bleakness and unspeakable suffering, and being forsaken. And this on top of the everyday tragedies and hurts and losses each one of us faces at different times.

“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken **US?**”

Whatever the cause of our forsakenness: our stubbornness, or our victimhood, the promise is sure. Jesus will return. Though we do not see it or feel it, or even believe it at times, this God, our God, remains. So that we are no longer forsaken, but gathered in, and sheltered, and blessed. Our world needs to hear this today, and maybe you do too. Beyond the forsakenness, the hope, the light, the healing, the blessing will come. Help each other; and hold on.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Michael B Curry, Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 2, p71