

Good Friday
(Apr. 22, 2011)

My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?

From noon onward, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, eli, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

A number of years ago I had the privilege of celebrating the Holy Week Liturgies in a parish that was largely made up of West Indian people – people from the islands of the Caribbean. On Good Friday the church was packed, filled to overflowing with everyone dressed up in their finest and the atmosphere was one of joy. On Easter Sunday, by contrast, there was not the large crowd that I expected. I asked an elderly parishioner why the difference. I said I would have expected the crowds on Easter Sunday dressed in their finest and rejoicing. He told me that on the island that he came from in the Caribbean he experienced two types of Christianity. There was the "Servants, obey your masters," type; and there was the kind represented by the crowded churches on Good Friday, full of people, especially men who never darkened the church doors even on Christmas and Easter, and they made a point of being there when they celebrated the day Jesus died? Why? The Jesus of the cross, he said, victim of human power, totally identifying himself with people in their suffering, made perfect sense to them. This was his grandparents' religion. This was his parents' religion

And for himself he said, the moment that rang truest was when he heard that awful cry of Jesus, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

He knew what it meant to be forsaken by a father. His own father had abandoned his family when he was eight years old and left his mother with four children to raise. They lived in dire poverty and were rarely sure where their next meal was coming from. His mother must have been an extraordinary person. She took the children to church on Good Friday and

told them, "Listen now, Jesus felt abandoned by his Father, too. He knows what we are suffering." And as that elderly man told me this there were tears in his eyes and he said, "That's why we come here on Good Friday in our finest clothes and we come rejoicing."

I often wonder what the people of Haiti feel as they still suffer the effects of the earthquake that devastated their country. Do they feel abandoned by God? Or the people of Japan who have seen their homes and villages, even perhaps some of their own family destroyed by the recent tsunami and earthquake. Do they feel abandoned by whatever God or gods they pray to?

And Jesus? Did he really feel abandoned by God? Was this, as Martin Luther once said, "God abandoned by God?"