

ATONEMENT NOT ABANDONMENT

Somewhere in town, at this very hour, there's a man in great pain. His life—if you can call it that—has fallen apart. His wife has asked him for a divorce, he's lost his job and to top it all off, he's just received the terrible news that he has cancer. The worst of it is, he's an observant Christian and has tried to do the best he could with what he's been given. He's been faithful and devout and dutiful. But what good has any of it done?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Somewhere else in town, and also at this very hour, a couple is huddled, numb with grief. Their son, a young man in the prime of life, has died. They're good Christian people, you see, and they know their Bible, so when he came out of the closet and told them he was gay they turned him out of the house, and, having nowhere to go, he moved to the city and fell in with a bad crowd. Last week, he was found dead of a drug overdose in the doorway of a building where he used to sleep.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And again, somewhere else in town, and also at this very hour, an old woman is putting on a kettle for tea. Her life hasn't been terrible, that's for sure. But her children are so busy with their lives, with being successful, with travel, with keeping up with all of their friends, that they don't have time for her anymore. This morning, when she called each of her children to see if they would like to have Easter lunch together, all of them told her they had other plans. "We'll call later, Mom," each of them said. Maybe they will, but right now she's lonely, so lonely, and she used to find praying made her a little less lonely, but it doesn't any more.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Perhaps there's nothing more terrible than being abandoned by those we love, those we have trusted with our very lives, those we believed would stay with us through thick and thin. This is why most of us are unable to cope with Good Friday. We're unable to cope with it because it seems to present a picture of a God who forsakes his only Son and who, we fear, may one day abandon us and the underlying terror that God will abandon us has, for most of us, never been far from our minds. Of all the fears we have about God—that he's a malevolent despot or a fierce judge—this one is the worst. And it's one that we believe is confirmed by the story of the Passion of Christ.

We're familiar with the story, gruesome though it may be: Jesus, the perfect and innocent Son of God, is sent by his heavenly Father to suffer and die for the sins of the imperfect and guilty world. And yet, at the end of it all, he cries out in dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But what's he done wrong? He's innocent of any crime. He's dutifully done his Father's bidding but is nonetheless forsaken and abandoned.

Yes, we're familiar with *that* story, or, should I say, with that *version* of the story. It's been the Church's favourite version down through the centuries. You and I, the story goes, are so irredeemably rotten, so utterly beneath contempt, that Jesus had to take our blame upon himself and, in so doing, became so soiled with the grime of sin and shame that not even his Father could look upon him. It was *our* sin that drove the nails into his hands and feet and *our* badness that sentenced him to death.

But there's another version of the story of Jesus' Passion, and it goes like this.

The jobless man with cancer man just found at the back of a dresser drawer a small box. Inside it is a sterling-silver crucifix. He's never worn it and the figure of Christ is pretty tarnished and dirty. Even so, he's closing his hand tightly around it. It gives him a little hope for the future. So he'll keep holding it, not quite sure why, except that holding it somehow makes him feel a little better.

Be not far from me, for trouble is near.

The parents of the dead young man have received a letter from a priest from the city. She's written to tell them that their son died huddled in the doorway of the church she serves. Their son often slept there, and a number of volunteers in the congregation's breakfast program had come to know him. One day he told the church secretary his parents' names and where they lived, and this is how she knew where to find them. Her letter ends by telling them that they were sorry they hadn't been able to do much for their son, but at least they were able to show him love.

Be not far from me, for trouble is near.

The old woman's caregiver goes to church, but she doesn't talk very much about it. This morning, she brought over three small crosses made from palm branches and some hot cross buns that she made early this morning. And there's one last thing: her church always livestreams its services. Would she like to watch the Easter Day service together? The old lady looks up with tears in her eyes. Yes, she says quietly, that would be very nice.

Be not far from me, for trouble is near.

Like all the great stories of our sacred tradition, the story of Good Friday isn't really about us at all. It isn't about how depraved, rotten and sinful we are, nor is it about the strange wheels of divine justice that are somehow lubricated with innocent blood.

The story isn't about us; it's about God. It tells of the lengths he will go to in order to redeem what is his own, not by exacting a terrible, righteous payment of the death of the guiltless, but through an example of redemptive love. It tells us that even in the bleakest and most painful human circumstances, Christ is present. It tells us that even in the midst of terrible loss and paralyzing grief, Christ is present. It tells us, perhaps most importantly, that Christ is present in each and every gesture of concern and compassion.

They trusted and you delivered them.

The Passion of Christ *reveals* the compassion of God; it tells of the unfathomable depths of his love, and what Good Friday *proclaims* is that God was not willing to abandon us to the power of death, that he was so unwilling to do so that *he* abandoned even his eternal glory and came to share our human life. He comes still into this world of despair and estrangement and loneliness and suffers and grieves and waits with all who are bereft and heavy-laden. He comes as one who has no form or majesty that we should look at him and with nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He comes to offer what we call atonement, AT-ONE-MENT, in which he reaches out through ordinary, human hands—frail, bloody and wounded—to those of us who are lost and as good as dead and touches us with his saving mercy. And in that coming and reaching out and touching, he reunites us with the loving Father who has been waiting long, so very long, to welcome his children back home.