

“Singing Clinkers with the Choir”

Psalms 22/Mark 15:33-39

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I. Introduction

I had a wonderful experience at Dan and Melissa Byerly’s wedding last Saturday. The wedding was in Harbison Chapel on the Grove City College campus, a chapel of the gothic style, like our building. When I arrived I sat in the pew in front of folks from our church. At first it didn’t strike me that most were from our choir. They were just my friends. But when we stood and sang a hymn something different happened. As I sang my clinkers with the small group of our choir behind me, I heard parts; soprano, alto, tenor.....and maybe even bass. The hymn sounded great as I was surrounded by these voices, and for a fleeting second I imagined I was part of it....part of this small choir.....part of this beauty of music and voice. In the midst of this small choir I experienced more than I was at that moment.

But, of course, the hymn ended quickly. When it was over we all sat down, and any fleeting fantasy about singing with the choir was over. But it did renew a hope....a hope that one day I too might be able to use the power of music with the power of words to communicate truth, wonder, beauty, love and praise of God. But I’m not counting on it anytime soon. In fact, it may not happen to the end of time when there’s a new heaven and a new earth (and a new Glenn). In the meantime I’ll just sing my clinkers not too close to the choir, and hope for a different day when God will make things new.

I think at its very deepest levels that is what is going on in Psalm 22. This familiar Psalm confesses the “real clinkers” in life, and worse. It is not an escape, or a “Have a good day,” or a smiley face. It cries out to God in fear that everything is collapsing in, and God is absent. But in the midst of that there is hope that it will not always be so.....that somehow and someday God will act to save. It’s the hope that someday clinkers will give way to beauty.....the hope that someday suffering will give way to joy. It’s the hope in the dynamic tension of what is, and who we trust God to be.

II. Text

To experience this dynamic tension between suffering and joy where hope resides, we’re going to hear Psalm 22 a little differently today. I have not yet been rescued from “clinkers,” so I’m going to read a couple verses. Then, following the lead of the choir, you’ll respond with the refrain you find in your bulletin. The refrain to the first part of the Psalm, which is a lament, is; “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” The refrain to the second part, which is a summons to praise God, is;

“Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, praise the name of the Lord.” Notice the dynamic tension between the two parts.....between the lament and the praise.

Let us hear and experience Psalm 22 together. **Read and sing.**

III. Brief Exegesis

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We hear the words, and we immediately think of the anguish of Jesus on the cross.....alone, forsaken, abandoned. But the Psalm also had a life for hundreds of years before Jesus’ cry from Golgotha.

The Psalm is a cry for help. In a deep crisis in life there is trouble with God, trouble with others and trouble with self. The God who once seemed so close is now distant and silent. Friends who were once part of life and laughter, now are gone, and the only voices are whispers of mocking and lies. A life that once walked downtown with confidence, now hides behind drawn curtains afraid.

In the past the person has know the presence and care of God. And the person has heard stories of God’s care....stories of miracles....stories of surprising experiences with God. And that’s what causes the crisis; God who had been so much a part of the person’s life.....God who has acted to save in the stories that are told.... is now absent. There was once comfort and promise, but now anguish fills the void, and unanswered prayers echo in the empty night. And there are a few people, always ready to mock and scorn the sufferer, ready with shallow answers, ready to make fun of his or her faith. They are like wild animals, circling and gloating over one who has fallen.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These are the right words in the parched mouth of Jesus. God is distant and silent. Jesus’ friends have all denied him and ran. His life is running out on the hard wood of the cross. And into the void come the jackals.....snapping, mocking, laughing.

And on the cross the eternal God becomes one with the ones who suffer.....one with the ones who have prayed this prayer.....one with the ones who will pray this prayer.....one with us when all we can sing is clinkers.....if anything at all. In a great theological irony and mystery, the God who has forsaken Jesus on the cross, becomes one with us in the suffering of Jesus on the cross. And at the time there was only one man who saw it.....the Roman centurion.....who at Jesus’ death confesses, “Truly this man was God’s Son.” (Mk 15:39)

Perhaps you are not surprised. Perhaps this is what you expected from Psalm 22.....familiar words like the first four notes of Beethoven’s 5th Symphony. But there is

more to the Psalm.....a whole second half. And in praying “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” Jesus is also praying the second half....hoping the second half.

The second half of Psalm 22 is a song of praise. The person sings for joy because God has acted to save. The praise begins as the faithful gather around the person to hear the story of God’s salvation. The community then joins in the song of salvation, and soon the number of voices is beyond count. But this circle of praise is not done, as it ever expands, somehow moving beyond death and time to gather all who have been, and all who will be.....into a great chorus that sings of God’s deliverance. There are no clinkers here. It is all the wonder of perfect music and perfect words; beauty, truth, holiness and praise of God. That is the second half of this Psalm.

And this is the great truth when Jesus prays “My God, my God, why have you forgotten me”.....he also has this second half of salvation and praise in mind. Somehow Jesus clings to the hope that the darkness of sin and death is not the final word.....that somehow beyond this hell God will bring life where there is only now death.....that somehow as Jesus swallows up evil and death on the cross God will bring a new kingdom in a new day. From the cross Jesus can only pray the truth of being forsaken. But somehow he also hangs onto the hope that it shall not always be so. Jesus enters into the darkness of the cross trusting that somehow God will act, so that in the time to come Jesus will stand again and sing of God’s salvation, and all of creation will join him. In life, and now in death, Jesus clings to hope.....hope in the love and power of God. It is no different for each of us.

IV. Reflection

In her poem “Otherwise,” Jane Kenyon writes this:

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know
it will be otherwise.

I like that poem because it invites us to see the simple things and people in our lives, and give thanks, because it could be “otherwise.” I also like the poem because it speaks the truth; there are days that are “otherwise.” And there comes seasons in our lives that are, and will be, “otherwise.” Grief, loss, chaos and tragedy are real. There are lost jobs, lost marriages, lost relationships with children, lost innocence, lost health, lost life and spouses lost to death. There are times when we pray the lament of Psalm 22 with Jesus.

But as Christians we dare to not lose hope....we dare to look through the darkness and cling to the love and power of God. We dare to believe that Psalm 22 has it right; there is grief, but the final song will be praise. We dare to hope that all that is lost will one day be restored. We dare to believe Jesus; the cross will give way to resurrection, and all creation will gather to sing of the final victory of God. We dare to add another line to Jane Kenyon’s poem, which might go something like this:

The losses are real.
But we cling
to the hope of God’s love,
and trust that
one day
it will be
otherwise.

At our best now we all sing “clinkers.” But we keep on singing, because we believe the day will come when it will be otherwise.