

The Perfect Question (Mark 15:25-37)

In Mark's record of the crucifixion the last words put on the lips of Jesus take the form of a question. And whilst what we each make of such a thing is perhaps our own business it's difficult to shake the sense that such a thing would leap out of its very self and change the whole world if given half a chance, like the energy from a broken atom.

A question. Not the conclusion of an argument or the results of a survey. Not a nice moral with a bow on it or the final scene that pieces together the plot like the parts of a broken vase. Not anything like a resolution or a realisation. Just a cold, hard question thrown up to God.

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

And it's tempting to take the sting out of this question. It's tempting to gut it of what makes a question a question and instead translate it into facts, into theology, into something that will hide from us its real face. To extract the *lack of knowing* that is the breath of each and every real question.

For real questions are frightening because *not knowing* is frightening. Real questions are fear and trembling because facing the unknown is fear and trembling.. They make the bones rattle and the eyes squint. Real questions are frightening because they are what happen to us when we face up to reality, fully, like two boxers at a weigh-in, down to the skin, eye to eye, nothing between them. Real questions happen when we face up to reality as limited and, at least by ourselves, lost creatures. Real questions happen when we come into the presence of God.

Dying in agony on the cross, Jesus asked a question. He had walked up to the top of the hill, up to the place where he could take his broken body no further. Jesus was face to face with reality. With suffering, with the unknown, with only the desire to understand, to make sense of, what was happening. Standing at the place from which every possible direction appeared to be a dead end. He stood there and called out in the night that had been born into that day, and asked his question.

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

I put this question in my pocket and carry it around with me for a few days, letting it enter my thoughts wherever it chooses it. And I slowly get the sense that such a question for such a man in such a place was driven through him like the nails that held him to the cross.

Forsaken. Forgotten. Abandoned.

Hung out to dry. Broken and left in the road. Let down. Rejected.

The very God who had flowed through his veins and who he'd met as Moses had on the quiet mountain. The God who he had seen in the impossible and wonderful changes to the poor and the blind and the lost like a mysterious wind in the branches of a tree. The God he'd called Father. The God who'd been often silence but never silent.

God had forgotten him. Left him there to rot. So it seemed.

Such a question must come from such things. There is no way around it, no way to avoid it. A spade is a spade, even when nailed to a cross. And if we want to do our theology we might do it here and say that this is how it had to be. That such a

question had to be given voice by such a man in such a place because it is the complete and infinite echo of our own questions that rattle *our* bones and shake *our* teeth. In his question he became us, all of us. He epitomised us. He captured us, perfectly. He was like an omnipotent photographer who managed in a single shot, in a single sentence to frame the great strained face of humanity.

He captured us perfectly, and in so doing, he perfected us.

For our own experience in this world is one of abandonment. Our experience is of being forgotten. We've been let down. Things haven't gone to plan. Reality has not panned out as it is in the movies or the magazines. *He said he loved me, and then he left. I can see in her eyes that she isn't really listening to me, that she isn't interested in what I am saying.* And we even abandon ourselves, whether in the good things we used to fill the future with or the things that used to make us look like fools but made us laugh so hard it hurt. Abandonment is in the very air we breathe, whether it falls on us like a mountain or a mustard seed.

Jesus captured us perfectly not by an elaborate argument or profound wisdom, but by being us, and being us more than we could ever be ourselves. And he did this by asking a question that contained all the pain and abandonment in the world.

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

In the asking of this question Jesus is the little boy lost in the endless supermarket. He is the wife who is cheated on after years of love and sacrifice. He is the teenage girl whose parents always work late. The old man who loses his old wife. The guy who is mugged for a packet of cigarettes whilst walking his dog in the park.

His question is our question and he asked it fully, perfectly.

In crying out his lostness and his abandonment, in letting his bones sing their true song he *broke the world with honesty and with humility*. The Roman soldiers who had whipped him raw and mocked and cursed him into the ground are standing there under him, watching him cry like a baby. Jesus is the business man so exhausted and destroyed by life that he breaks down in a flood of tears in the boardroom meeting to the embarrassment and smirks of his colleagues.

A flood of honesty. A river of humility. Wild waters that break the world in two.

Jesus has captured us all in his question, and does so with an honesty and humility that lowers the bar of how to live up to the stars. An honesty and humility that breaks all the barriers and divisions and hierarchies that we build and we build and we build like there's no tomorrow. He does that which no argument could do, that which no moral or maxim could achieve. His question is an expression of what he feels. Instead of papering over the cracks in the broken wall with facts and figures, dogmas and doctrines, prohibitions and exhortations, he bears his cracks to the world, no matter how deep they push into him.

And so just as his question captures us perfectly, it also offers us the road to our own perfection. A way of honesty and a way of humility.

...And then the most terrible-wonderful thing.

If faith is as simple as trusting/never questioning God then on the cross Jesus lost his faith.

If faith is just a matter of sticking to your guns, come hell or high-water, even if you have no guns left to shoot, then Jesus is as faithless as any of us. He did not say 'but your will be done', or 'you've got it all mapped out'. Jesus did not trust in God in this way. He lost his faith, and in losing his faith he gained it, in the most

amazing way. Triumph through defeat. Success through failure. Life through death.

His triumph is that, unlike most of us most of the time, Jesus does not cast out his question into nothingness, or at people who are as helpless as we are, or babble it just for the sake of it. Instead, and just as a perfect question should be, Jesus asks his question with the expectation of an answer. And in this expectation he throws it up to God.

My God, my God...

Jesus asks the perfect question. In so doing he gives up his faith to miraculously and impossibly gain it. And in so doing he shows us what faith is, how to walk the road that has been broken open, splitting the world in two.

Jesus' question is not rhetorical. It is not to look clever. It is not loaded with secrets and subtleties. It is the desire to understand and make sense of what was happening. And in and through this desire, to reach out to God, even though every available shred of evidence was utterly contrary to such a God. To anything good or true or beautiful. To anything meaningful. And not a reaching out that was forced, or through gritted teeth, or what the preacher said to do, but as the only possible response to coming face-to-face with reality in the most terrifyingly complete way. So that on the cross Jesus' faith was complete. His complete and perfect humanity fully exposed to the terrifying reality of the world so that his only response was to cry out to what seemed to be an absent God.

Even though he was a thousand Jobs sitting in the ashes, he did not despair. For despair is the asking of questions that are not really questions at all. Real questions are asked *of* something or someone with the *hope* of an answer. And

where there is hope, even if a single atom in an infinite universe, despair is absent. Real questions are our coming face to face with what is real and simply standing in such a place. And when we do this, just as he did, when we are reduced to what we are, without the add-ons, the frills, the elaborations, the illusions and delusions, and we stand there in fear and trembling we cannot help but call out to Him as we cannot help our leg jolt when the doctor strikes our knee.

And in this final twist we might see the final twist of our own lives. In the pattern of the crucifixion and Jesus' final words, we find the blueprint of our own salvation. We see our deepest desire for meaning when faced with the meaninglessness of living in a world in which we have experienced abandonment. We realise our need for honesty and humility when faced with such a reality; of accepting and being who we are, warts and all, tears and laughter, success and failure, in our shame and our cruelty as well as in our limitless goodness and beauty.

And we understand that through this honesty and in this humility in calling out to God in the form of a question, even if it is a question that cripples us in the eyes of others, our faith is born. It is to ask our question of a God who appears absent as far as the eye can see. To ask it in anger and fear and aloneness, but to ask it *of* Him and to ask it *in the hope* of an answer, whatever that answer may be.

Through his perfect question that captures us perfectly Jesus breaks open the Way with honesty and humility for us to follow. We choose to do so, in suffering as well as joy, not because we should but because we can, because of him. Because a speck of hope weighs more than a mountain of despair.