

Easter Assembly

We recently mourned and celebrated the service of Pope Francis, who died on Easter Monday. I would like to share thoughts brought about by his life and his death. As a Pope, Francis was characterised by his humility and his love of others. He wasn't always so – he learned humility through being tested and troubled. When he needed to find a quality upon which to base his life, he chose to serve others. In doing so, he found himself.

That process is most appropriate for Easter – Christianity's most important festival. Founded on early church's need to understand challenge of the death of Jesus, it also celebrates a triumph over death and the victory of humility.

At Easter, one is called upon to think about the relationship between God and man. One way to understand that relationship is by thinking what we can learn from the last words attributed to Jesus in each of the four Gospels.

In 33AD, Jerusalem was a melting pot of different ideas and peoples. The Book of Acts, which covers the immediate aftermath of the crucifixion, tells us, 'There were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.' In addition, there were plenty of others from all around the Roman Empire. The Apostles spreading the message of Christianity in its earliest moments had a communications challenge to reach such a wide audience. That challenge is encapsulated in the reported miracle of Pentecost, when the Apostles apparently found themselves able to speak in tongues – speaking in a way that allowed all their listeners to hear their words, but in each listener's own language. However, their problem was even greater than that, if possible. How were they to make the death of Jesus understandable and relevant to so many different people? The Apostles were full of fervour, but communication of that belief would be no easy task.

The way they addressed the needs of the changing audience before them can be seen the words given to Jesus on the cross in the four Gospels. Each Gospel was written at a different time. The first of the four is Mark's Gospel, written less than 20 years after the crucifixion, and thus well within living memory. Mark gives Jesus' last words in Aramaic – Jesus' native language – and then translates it: 'At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani? Which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"'

Writing slightly later, Matthew's Gospel is very similar. However, he changes the Aramaic 'Eloi' into the more standard Hebrew 'Eli'.

On the face of it, these are remarkable words for both Gospel writers to record. It sounds as if, as Jesus is dying, he feels that God has abandoned him. It sounds despairing. However, this is absolutely the wrong interpretation. There has been a long build-up to this moment, during which Jesus tells his companions precisely what will happen and is seen preparing himself for his coming death. It is highly likely that these were exactly the words Jesus spoke: Matthew and Mark expect their hearers to know that Jesus is quoting Psalm 22. Jesus is drawing upon a Jewish tradition in which a line makes reference to a Psalm in the Old Testament.

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

Why are you so far from helping me,

From the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

And by night, but find no rest.’

The context is that the Psalmist, King David, is seeking God’s protection at a low moment in his life. This is the Psalm in which he successfully gains that protection. The Psalm goes on:

‘Yet you are holy,

Enthroned on the praises of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted;

They trusted and you delivered them.

To you they cried, and were saved;

In you they trusted, and were not put to shame.’

Psalms at the time, were known by their first line. Thus, it is clear that far from having an existential crisis, Jesus is asserting his confidence in receiving help from God. This is also important to Matthew and Mark, as they were determined to explain the paradox of an incarnate God who could be killed by his enemies.

But there is an interesting change in the next Gospel, that of Luke. Luke was writing in around 80AD, a full 60 years after the crucifixion. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus’ last words are very different – ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ The change is significant because the audience Luke was addressing has also changed. His Gospel is addressed to Theophilus, a young Greek friend, not the largely Jewish audience of the first two Gospels. The previous reference to Psalm 22 is a problem, especially as it could be misinterpreted as a cry of despair. Luke wants to widen the circle who will respond to the young Christian message, so he does not want to retain the idea of being forsaken. However, the group to whom he speaks still contains a significant Jewish contingent. So, Luke keeps the idea of a Psalm reference but changes the Psalm. He chooses to reference Psalm 31 instead, which has words that cannot be easily taken out of context:

‘In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame;

In your righteousness deliver me.

Incline your ear to me,

Rescue me speedily.

Be a rock of refuge for me,

A strong fortress to save me.

You are indeed my rock and my fortress;

For your name’s sake lead me and guide me,

Take me out of the net that is hidden for me,

For you are my refuge.

Into your hands I commit my spirit;

You have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.’

20 or so years later we come to the last of the four Gospels, that of John. John does not even try to find a link to a Psalm. He has Jesus' final words as the straightforward, 'It is finished.'

In fact, he does not even offer the final words in Hebrew, let alone in Aramaic. The actual phrase he gives is 'Tetelestai', which is Greek. John's change is in keeping with his approach elsewhere in his Gospel. He cites the Old Testament about half as often as the other Gospels, and he frequently adds explanations for the foreign reader when he does so. He is trying to make the Christian message as widely accessible as he can.

So, the single moment of crucifixion, which is commemorated at Easter, is offered up in different ways by the Gospels. With Mark, we have an account which is rooted in the Jewish tradition, assumes a very detailed knowledge of the Old Testament and acknowledges Jesus as a speaker of Aramaic. For him, the crucifixion is supremely important, but important as the culmination of Jewish tradition. Matthew shifts Jesus into Hebrew, which acknowledges a wider Jewish audience, but does not move far from Mark. Luke is shaping a message that is still connected to Psalms and Jewish tradition, but which is less open to misinterpretation by a wider reading audience around the Roman Empire. Luke himself ends his Gospel preaching his message in Rome. Finally, with John, we have a message that has de-coupled from its Jewish roots and is aimed at an international audience.

What does this mean? That the words changed to meet the developing audience. Does that make it inauthentic? No, in that the core values were unchanged, but that the way in which those values are understood is connected to the people understanding them.

I think that this progression is a sign of strength and is enormously important in understanding a mature religious viewpoint. At the core moment of the religion – the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus - it puts a developing relationship between God and people at its heart. My point is that at any given point in history, individuals and wider society are exploring what it means to be connected to God. Everyone has to work out that relationship for themselves. The process – the journey - is the important thing. That early questioning, reaching out, developing sophistication of message is evident from the start of the Christian religion and is the spirit in which I would hope everyone to establish a relationship with the divine, however you perceive it. Your relationship with the 'sublime other' will change as you pass through life, and so it should.

To return to where I began, Pope Francis demonstrated that developing relationship with his faith and his understanding of his role. He grew in his faith as he lived. And he provided an example to others by the way he departed this life.