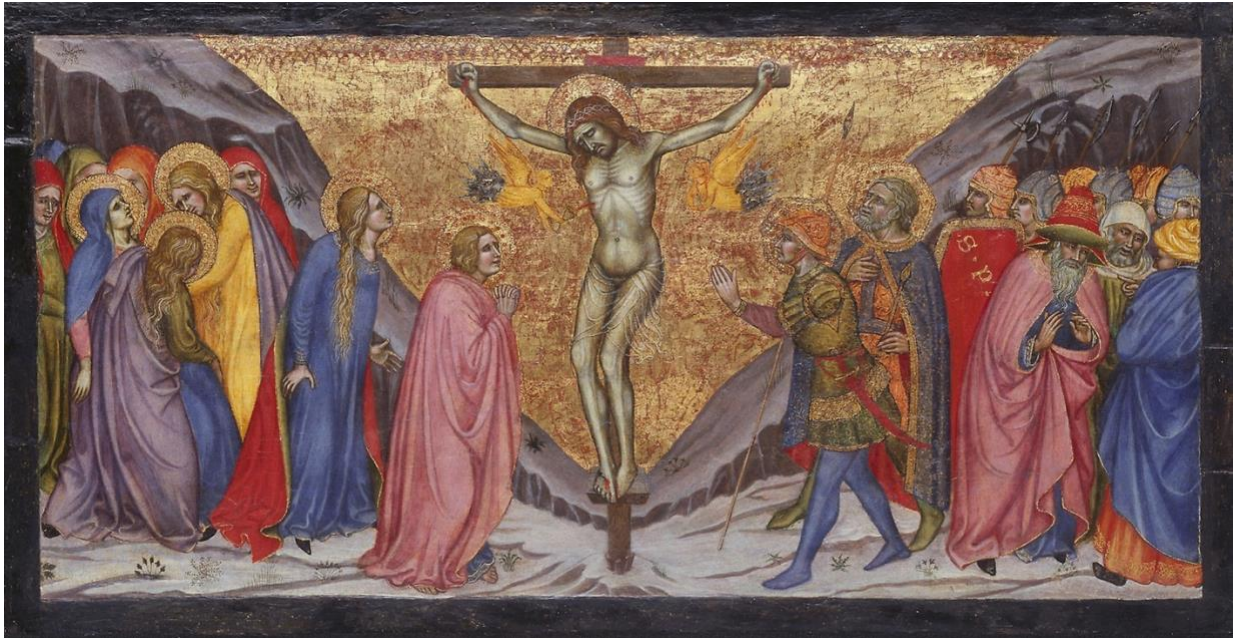


Holy Week: Crucifixion
a reflection by Jarred Mercer



Gabriel Jackson, *THE PASSION OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST*
(listen on [Apple Music](#) or [Spotify](#))
libretto compiled by Simon Jones

And it was the third hour, and they crucified him.
And the superscription of his accusation was written over, THE KING OF THE JEWS.
And with him they crucify two thieves; the one on his right hand, and the other on his left.
And the scripture was fulfilled, which saith, And he was numbered with the transgressors.
And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, Ah, thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, Save thyself, and come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking said among themselves with the scribes, He saved others; himself he cannot save. Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe. And they that were crucified with him reviled him. (Mark 15.23-32)

*Crux fidelis inter omnes arbor una nobilis:
nulla silva talem profert fronde, flore, germine.
Dulce lignum, dulces clavos, dulce pondus sustinet.*

And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama

sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

And some of them that stood by, when they heard it, said, Behold, he calleth Elias. And one ran and filled a sponge full of vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink, saying, Let alone; let us see whether Elias will come to take him down. And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost. (*Mark 15.33-37*)

*Pange lingua gloriosi lauream certaminis,
et super crucis trophaeo dic triumphum nobilem:
qualiter Redemptor orbis immolatus vicerit.*

And the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom. And when the centurion, which stood over against him, saw that he so cried out, and gave up the ghost, he said, Truly this man was the Son of God. (*Mark 15.38-39*)

*Aequa Patri Filioque, inclito Paraclito,
sempiterna sit beatæ Trinitati gloria,
cuius alma nos redemit atque servat gratia. Amen.*

Venantius Fortunatus (c.530–c.600/609)
(Hymn at Matins, Passiontide)*

*English translation:

Cross of our faith, uniquely one noble tree:
no woodland can produce a tree to match in leaf, flower or seed.
Sweet is the wood that bears the sweet nails, the sweet burden.

Tell out my tongue, the victory in the glorious struggle,
and tell of the noble triumph in the victory of the cross:
how the world's Redeemer, through his sacrifice, has conquered.

Equally to the Father and the Son, and to the glorious Paraclete,
eternal glory be to the blessed Trinity,
whose loving grace has redeemed and saved us. Amen

Sweet is the wood that bears the sweet nails, the sweet burden.

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

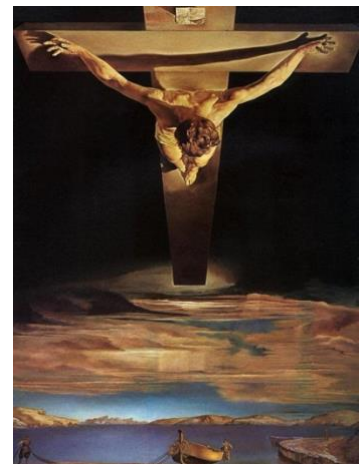
The sweetness of the *crux fidelis*, the ‘**cross of faith**’, a tree that no tree in any **woodland can ‘match in leaf, flower or seed’; the noble triumph, the** victory, the glory. The hymn of Fortunatus, among the most beautiful and rich in the history of Christian hymnody, does not seem to match the cry of Christ: the cry not of sweetness and victory, but forsakenness and defeat. **This doesn’t invalidate the** *crux fidelis*, it just means the cross of our faith is multifaceted, rich, and complex. It meets us not just in victory and not only in defeat; it is not only the fullness of our hope or the depths of our despair. The cross is the fullness of our whole being, the full breadth of our life and salvation with all its moving parts.

Both the cry of dereliction, as it is often called: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’, and the ‘noble tree’ of Fortunatus, in fact, encompass in themselves the fullness of the defeat and the victory that the cross entails. The ‘sweetness’ is a sweetness of nails and of burden, and the dereliction and abandonment in Christ’s cry is a quotation of Psalm 22—a Psalm attributed to David **that actually tells of God’s** deliverance and salvation. The first two verses of the Psalm speak of utter abandonment, desolation, and forsakenness:

*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.*

But verse 3 begins with a forceful ‘yet’. And this ‘yet’ drives the remainder of the Psalm, all 28 verses. ‘Why are you so far from helping me’, the psalmist pleads, ‘yet’, he continues, ‘you our ancestors trusted ... and you delivered them’; ‘yet ... to you they cried, and were saved’; and the psalmist praises the Lord because though he feels **forsaken and abandoned, God** ‘did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I **cried to him**’. And still ‘yet’: ‘Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it’. The ancestors, the psalmist, the future generations; past, present, and future see the deliverance and salvation of God, even as the psalmist in the present moment feels at the bottom of despair in his cry.

The psalmist’s cry of dereliction comes primarily from the scorn and hatred he receives from others, which prefigures the scene of the crucifixion: they mock him, saying, ‘Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—let him rescue the one in whom he delights!’ He reports that they ‘divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots’, **and he is ‘poured out like water’**. The uncertain meaning of the Hebrew of v16 can even be translated, as in the King James and several other translations, **as, ‘they pierced my hands and my feet’**.



The actual abandonment, the true forsakenness of the psalmist in Psalm 22, comes from the people, his people, deriding and abusing him. The cry to God in the opening verse: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ opens up into ‘But you, Lord, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me’ (v19). **The Psalm is a prayer trusting in God’s deliverance and asking for God’s help in the time of abandonment.** This in no way diminishes the feeling of forsakenness and the direction of that cry of forsakenness to God: ‘My God, my God, why have *you* forsaken me?’. This sense of desolation and dereliction is real. And nowhere is the psalmist condemned for wrestling with God in his time of need, abandonment, fear, and doubt. And of course, neither is Jesus for crying out in the same way.

The paradox here is that the seeming contradiction between the cry of forsakenness and simultaneous cry of surrender to God in trust are not contradictions at all in the

often uncertainty, confusion, and even absurdity that is our life and, of course, death. **Jesus lives and dies this paradox himself in his final words: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ in Mark’s account, but ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’ in Luke’s**—a cry not of being forsaken, but of forsaking the self into the mercy and love of God.

This paradox in no way diminishes the dereliction or takes away from its reality. If anything, it emphasises the bewilderment of the cross of Jesus Christ rather than explains away the challenges. **Jesus’ cry on the cross saves us from our futile attempts** to explain God in human terms or flatten out the mystery of God among us in Christ as, inexplicably, the abandonment of God enters into the very life of God. But what the paradox can do is turn us toward a different kind of forsakenness.

We have out of necessity forsaken much of our daily routine and the general flow of our lives. And hopefully one positive thing that can come from this tragic pandemic is that some changes to our lifestyle can stick for the sake of human society and for the sake of our planet. But learning the paradox of the cross—the victory and the defeat, the vileness and the beauty, the abandonment and the deliverance—can open us up into another form of forsakenness, a deeper forsaking of all the false pretences and perceptions of ourselves and of others that leave us desolate, and enables us to abide with Christ in the paradox of the defeat and the triumph, the burden and the **sweetness, the ‘forsaken me ... forsaken me’ together with ‘Father, into your hands ...’** And we can live this impossibility of the *crux fidelis* because the cross makes present **God’s love in** both the cry of dereliction and the hope of deliverance.

*Cross of our faith, uniquely one noble tree:
no woodland can produce a tree to match in leaf, flower or seed.
Sweet is the wood that bears the sweet nails, the sweet burden*



*Prayer before a crucifix
Look down upon me, good and gentle Jesus while before
your face I humbly kneel and, with burning soul, pray
and beseech you to fix deep in my heart lively sentiments
of faith, hope, and charity; true contrition for my sins,
and a firm purpose of amendment.*

*While I contemplate, with great love and tender pity,
your five most precious wounds, pondering over them
within me and calling to mind the words which David,
your prophet, said to You, my Jesus: **‘They have pierced
My hands and My feet,
they have numbered all My bones’.** Amen.*