**A Cry of Absence**

**Reflections for the winter of the Heart**

**Martin E. Marty**

**W IPF 1983**

This narrative emerges out of a particular experience, that of the death of the author’s wife, Elsa, from cancer. Marty narrates the life changing trauma at the opening of the book in the preface and then allows this sad music to shape a reading of Scripture which is searching, searing and strong.

A leading US academic, Marty is widely regarded as a key interpreter of religion in America. An ordained Lutheran pastor his theological and spiritual world is shaped by the reformed tradition but not limited by it. Throughout these eight skilfully written chapters he reminds us that institutional and organised religion can so easily mask the face of God and offer an inauthentic spirituality.

The central metaphor, ‘the winter of the heart’ which is captured and explored through the Psalms as a movement of the heart in embracing the loneliness and chaos of pain, loss, evil and the mystery of death. In every chapter the reader is urged onto and into a deeper search for truth; to new horizons of meaning; of attention to unanswered questions together with pain filled silence.

This is, by usual standards and old book, secured via Amazon and printed by them – rather expensively and unsatisfactorily – and I was recommended it by a friend knowing some of my own particular story and some of the theological questions that I continue to ask. At the moment I’m not entirely sure that we are equipped, engaged and open enough to the sheer horror and nothingness of suffering. In this digitalised age we attempt to capture meaning to quickly, to briefly and without enough readiness to stay with the winter, the darkness, the silence. We skate over the ice without being ready to plunge into the dark, cold waters below.

I cannot say whether this book helps in any immediate or obvious way. It reframes some questions and helpfully puts all human struggles into an economy of time and space for those of us who whole to the anchor of faith for hope. There must be, for all of us, a careful attention to the parts of our winter that we too quickly wish to pass through into another season. Perhaps our modern age, our religious and ecclesiastical life are over dominated by the summer at the expense of winter. Our world and our lives need a spirituality that can embrace abandonment, despair and defeat. A winter of the heart may be a source of renewal and change for us and the communities we build. Communion and community are always stronger and wiser when formed out of the trauma of some of our profoundest experiences of loving, living and losing. Love – even in the winter of our hearts – is always stronger than death.

This is, above all, a meditation on the character and presence of God. Is God present? Why is God silent? What does the soul long for? How is God hope for us? These are constant, truthful and searing questions as we attempt to articulate the rhythms of life in a way that trust can be nurtured.

In a world distracted by triviality and the church that can so often fail to be appropriately serious this is a sober narrative of wisdom. Reading books may fail to change the world – but this narrative has transformed my perceptions. For us as early summer blossoms the work of the winter experience of our hearts perhaps begins?

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