

Singing to the Lord in Exile:

Reflection IV: An Exposed Voice

Any brief reflection on Our Lord's passion will not do justice to the depths of divine glory which it reveals (see John 7:39; 12:16, etc.) and the transformation which it ought to provoke in us. Perhaps this is one reason why the Good Friday begins and ends in silence: even those of us given to theological speculation are well advised to close our mouths and simply gaze on the image of Christ crucified.

In this reflection, then, I won't try to comment on many aspects of Christ's death which might yield spiritual or theological fruit. Rather, I want to focus on two aspects of the Passion which can perhaps be explored by attention to the moving *Improperia* ("Reproaches"), which are often sung to the famous setting by Tomas Luis de Victoria: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bH8t5BKI7Qg>

**Popule meus, quid feci tibi?
Aut in quo contristavi te?
Responde mihi.**

*Quia eduxi te de terra Aegypti:
parasti Crucem Salvatori tuo.*

**Hagios ho Theos.
Sanctus Deus.
Hagios Ischyros.
Sanctus Fortis.
Hagios Athanatos, eleison hemas.
Sanctus Immortalis, miserere nobis.**

**My People, what have I done to you?
Or, how have I offended you?
Answer me.**

*Because I lead you out of Egypt,
You prepared a Cross for your Saviour.*

**Holy is God,
Holy is God.
Holy, the Mighty One,
Holy, the Might One.
Holy, Immortal One, have mercy on us
Holy, Immortal One, have mercy on us.**

In the *Improperia*, God calls to His People to account: despite his care for them shown throughout salvation history, they have rejected Him. Although at face value it is those who immediately crucifying Christ who are being interrogated, it is obvious from the liturgical context that all of us form part of God's People, which has through sin rejected God's offer of friendship and guidance.

Victoria's setting, I think, helps to bring home the emotional impact of God's questions by the contrast between the lonely, slow plainchant tone of the cantor who sings "God's part" and the rich harmony of the choir proclaiming God's Holiness, Strength and Immortality. The reproachful and hurt voice which reveals our responsibility for Christ's passion is set against a serene proclamation of God's Triune Majesty. The former exposed voice surely parallels the cry of Jesus, dying naked on the cross as variously recorded by the Gospels and dramatically set to music by Carlos Gesualdo;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-HIFKBhOV40>

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me... Father into your hands, I commend my spirit... It is finished." (Matthew 27:46; Luke 23:46; John 19:30)

This contrast also, therefore, presents a central mystery of Good Friday: that God suffers on the cross. Catholic theology does not explain such statements by claiming (with some recent theologians) that Christ suffers in His divine nature, as if the pain of suffering can be removed by its divinisation. Instead, the Church has traditionally held that Christ suffered in His human nature whilst His divine nature incapable of suffering, at least in the easily intelligible physical/emotional since in which physical creatures suffer. Although the attempt to understand the "hypostatic" union between these two natures in Christ's single person is an extremely delicate (perhaps impossible) task for theologians, Victoria's *Improperia* provides an image in music of the way in which Christ's divine and human natures do not exist in separation even on Calvary, yet preserve their integrity. In the Incarnation, suffering doesn't become divine in itself, which would mean that it receives some inherent dignity or legitimacy. But through the hypostatic union, the

suffering Christ- and by extension, the suffering of His People- is never completely alienated from God's glory.¹

But for now, I wish to return to the text of the *Improperia*, which invites us to consider our own relationship to God, and His verdict on our actions. According to some Christians who endorse the theory of "penal substitution", Christ Himself was judged and punished on the cross in our place, for the sins which we have committed. To support this position, appeals are sometimes made (*inter alia*) to Isaiah's "Servant Song", which is read on Good Friday before the Passion:

**He was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed. [...]
He poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53: 5; 12)**

However, whilst the Church does not rule out this reading, in my opinion it suffers from severe difficulties. Firstly, most philosophers and theologians have thought that even God's power over what is metaphysically possible: God cannot, for example, change the past or create a round square. Yet it is highly dubious that it is even metaphysically possible to transfer moral responsibility from one person to another, and if Christ was not guilty of our sins then it is difficult to see how he can suffer just punishment for them. Secondly, other texts which we read in Holy Week- notably, the Epistle to the Hebrews - insist that Jesus was without sin (Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 3:5), and that this enabled Him to lay down his spotless life as a perfect sacrifice to God just as the animals sacrificed in the Old Testament were ritually pure (Hebrews 9:14; 1 Peter 1:19). Yet if Jesus was rendered guilty of sin on Calvary, it is difficult to see how His life can have been offered to God as a pure sacrifice.

Are there, then other ways to understand the language of Jesus "bearing the sin" of many people, or receiving "punishment" as Isaiah 53 indicates?² Perhaps. Rather than holding that God really holds Jesus responsible for our actions, we might rather interpret this text as saying that Jesus dies *because of*, or *to alleviate the effects* of our sin. In doing so, he receives human "punishment" which even appears to constitute divine rejection (Isaiah 53:4). He takes upon Himself the painful alienation from others which is the unfortunate outcome of sin. In fact, however, Christ is only the object of unjust human and not divine condemnation (see Isaiah 53:8), and so God pronounces Christ innocent through his resurrection (see 1 Timothy 3:16).

By contrast with a "penal substitution" explanation of the atonement, the *Improperia* suggest a different reading of the theme of judgement in the John's Passion. As Christ hints earlier in John's Gospel (John 12:31) there is a sense in which "the world"- that is, those parts of human life and society which reject God- is judged by on Calvary. If Christ is God Incarnate, then the crucifixion exposes the extent to which humans are determined to reject God: when we see that God interferes with our own plans and needs, we might even attempt to murder Him. Whilst Pilate seeks to learn "the truth" about Jesus' identity, in failing to ponder his own relationship to the Truth, he makes a fateful lapse in judgement (see John 18:37-8).

¹ For an excellent book-length reflection on the question of divine suffering which defends a traditional account of Christ's suffering, see Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, 2000).

² For further discussion of how to interpret texts used to support the view that God punished Christ on the cross, see Gerald O'Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer: A Christian Approach to Salvation* (OUP, 2007).

This might all sound like bad news: that God's love serves to highlight our faithlessness. But as John's Gospel elsewhere indicates, God's intention is to reconcile us through Christ's death rather than to condemn us (John 3:17). Rather, Jesus dies so that he might unite others to God:

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

So it might be wrong to view the events of Good Friday as a judgement on our sins in the strict sense of any legal condemnation or punishment, despite the ingenious recent suggestion by a prominent Christian philosopher that God chooses to punish humans through the suffering of Our Lord.³ But perhaps the crucifixion involves our judgement in a broader sense: it is a public display of the tragedy of our rejection of God which allows us to “judge” (i.e. perceive) our own situation afresh. Even more importantly, our reaction to the love of God shown to us in Christ provides the criterion by which we are and will be judged; or by which we judge ourselves (see John 3:18-19; John 12:48).

In this respect, there might be a parallel between the Passion and our experience of the current pandemic. Both events are a “crisis” for us: moments which force us to examine ourselves and to make decisive decisions, revealing who we really are.

This Easter, with our usual routines disrupted, we have a fresh chance to reflect on what we really value. With the help of God's grace and through the light of the cross, let us notice those parts of our lives which reject God and others, turning back to the Lord.

³ Mark Murphy, “Not Penal Substitution but Vicarious Punishment”, *Faith and Philosophy* 26.3 (2009).