

Critical Reflections on the Good Friday Liturgy: Paschal Character, Relationship to Passion Sunday, Soteriology, Christology, and the Preeminence of John

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This is one of a series of studies of the Good Friday liturgy. The others are:

Critical Reflection on the Passion Narrative of the Good Friday Liturgy
Critical Reflections on the Reproaches of the Good Friday Liturgy
Re-visioning the Good Friday Liturgy
Veneration of the Cross (Good Friday): Alternative Models

Introduction

The Good Friday liturgy raises a number of other theological issues in addition to the passion narrative and reproaches. These include matters of paschal character, relationship of Good Friday to Passion Sunday, soteriology, christology and the preeminence of the gospel according to John. These issues are considered here briefly, and they need to be taken into account in any re-visioning of the liturgies of Good Friday, Passion Sunday and the Sundays of Lent.

Unless specified otherwise, this discussion has to be with the Roman Catholic liturgy of Good Friday.

Sources and selected reading are given at the end.

Anti-Judaism: Additional Perspectives

Anti-Judaism is broader than the Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. For the sake of brevity I will use the “Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations” published by the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the U. S. Catholic bishops (1985 revision) as a source of additional issues, concerns and principles; I also add one other issue not named there. All of these points have been considered at greater length in various publications by John Pawlikowski, Eugene Fisher and others.

1. An explicit rejection should be made of the historically inaccurate notion that Judaism of [Jesus’] time, especially that of Pharisaism, was a decadent formalism and hypocrisy. (10c)
2. Special care should be taken never to . . . portray Judaism as rejected by God or in any way unworthy of our love and esteem. (4)
3. [We must] recognize Judaism as a living tradition that has had a strong and creative religious life through the centuries since the birth of Christianity from the common root. (10a,i)
4. [We must] remove . . . those materials . . . that fail to show Judaism’s continuing role in salvation history in a positive light. (5)
5. [We must] appreciate the Hebrew Scriptures as a source of faith with their own perpetual value . . . (10a,ii)

6. I would add: We must not deny or misrepresent the Jewishness of Jesus.

The first and second readings of the Good Friday liturgy need to be evaluated in light of this broader perspective regarding anti-Judaism.

First Reading. Though Isaiah 52:12 - 53:13 obviously comes from the Hebrew Scriptures, its context and origins are largely ignored by Christians when they use it liturgically. Here are statements from two contemporary liturgical commentaries.

Adrian Nocent

The exegetes do not agree on the identity of the servant described by Isaiah. Some believe it to be the prophet itself; others think Israel is meant. . . .

In any case, when the Church reads this text, we see in it a moving description of the Christian who is laid low and accepts death as an expiatory sacrifice that will bring life to the nation. From our standpoint as Christians, the interpretation of this text by the New Testament is decisive: the Servant is Christ. We admit that by the rules of exegesis the servant may be interpreted as being either an individual or a people. Yet it is impossible for us to hear the passion read on Good Friday and not see in it the image of him whose victorious death the Church is celebrating. (p 84)

Days of the Lord

When one reads a passage like this in the Bible, one naturally wonders who the prophet has in mind: who could this Servant be?

The Christian tradition has long answered this question unequivocally, “Jesus”; he is the only one who perfectly fits Isaiah’s image. The description of the servant matches that of the Lord in some elements of the passion. (p 24)

It is one thing to interpret a passage from the Jewish Bible from a Christian perspective; that is only natural. It is another thing to forget or deny or obliterate the Jewish origins, context and meaning of the passage. This, I suggest, is what has happened to Isaiah’s fourth servant song in its Christian liturgical use. I suggest that this is a type of anti-Judaism that ought to be corrected.

Second Reading. This reading from Hebrews refers to the Yom Kippur liturgy in the Temple, with Jesus now as the high priest and the liturgy now in heaven. However, the intention is not to honor Jesus as a Jew or to show continuity between Judaism and Christianity. Instead, the intention is to show discontinuity: Jesus and his sacrifice are not only superior to the Jewish

priests and their sacrifices, but the Jewish liturgy has been invalidated and replaced by Jesus. Such “supersessionism,” though a long Christian tradition, is now unacceptable to many.

Paschal Character of Good Friday

For many centuries, Good Friday was the conclusion and climax of Lent. Easter followed, but was separate from -- even somewhat isolated from -- Good Friday both liturgically and theologically.

Since Vatican Council II and the liturgical renewal it inaugurated, however, Good Friday and Easter are linked closely together under the concepts and designations Paschal Mystery and Easter / Paschal Triduum (to which Holy Thursday evening adds an introduction). Good Friday is no longer the conclusion of Lent, which comes to a quiet end the afternoon of Holy Thursday.

This far-reaching conceptual change with respect to Good Friday was not accompanied by substantial changes in the liturgy for this day, however. Some Roman Catholics still have not heard about the unity of the Easter Triduum, or understand it, or have not been convinced by it, or have not experienced it in the liturgical life of their own parish. Some other Christian Churches have not changed their view regarding Good Friday (namely, that it is the conclusion and high point of Lent), and in many respects, new and old views regarding Good Friday compete in our society -- see how the news media treat Good Friday!

The liturgical questions are: (a) to what extent and in what ways does the liturgy of Good Friday express -- or fail to express -- its paschal character: its locus within the celebration of the Great Three Days of Easter, and (b) how might the Good Friday liturgy better express its paschal character?

At present, for example, the first opening prayer does include the phrase “paschal mystery,” but this is defined entirely in relation to Jesus’ suffering and death. This is not only unfortunate, but theologically dangerous. The second opening prayer is entirely about Jesus death. The first reading strongly stresses the suffering of the Servant = Jesus; the second reading has to do with sacrifice. The psalm refers to the suffering just ones, though it does include trust and hope as well. The intercessions have little paschal character, though one refers to those preparing for baptism. The first antiphon for the veneration of the cross refers simply to the cross; the second mentions both cross and resurrection. The prayer after communion is paschal in saying, “you have restored us to life by the triumphant death and resurrection of Christ. . .”, while the prayer over the people refers to “your people who have devoutly recalled the death of your Son in the sure hope of the resurrection.”

Good Friday and Passion Sunday

At present, the passion narratives of the three synoptic gospels are proclaimed, over three years, in the liturgy for Passion (Palm) Sunday; the passion narrative from John is then proclaimed each year on Good Friday. This practice raises several liturgical and pastoral concerns.

The passion of Jesus Christ is read twice in the course of one week, but the liturgical context for each reading is quite distinct. Passion Sunday is close to the end of Lent, and the emphasis is on the death of Christ. Good Friday is part of the paschal triduum, and the emphasis is -- or should be -- on death and resurrection together. In practice, is this distinction appreciated? Is it adequately expressed liturgically? Is it helpful to people to maintain this dual emphasis -- or confusing? Would this difference be better appreciated if the Good Friday liturgy were altered?

For some people, I suspect, Good Friday is really celebrated twice so far as the passion narrative is concerned, once on Sunday and again on Friday. For these, the two passion narratives most likely are equivalent stories of the suffering and death of Jesus.

This picture is made more complex -- and more serious -- if people celebrate Passion Sunday but do not come to church on Good Friday; this is in fact the situation for many. In this case they hear the passion narrative only on Sunday, and hence only in the context of Jesus' death. Their next liturgy, in many cases, is Easter Sunday, when the message of the resurrection is proclaimed. They never hear the message of the paschal triduum, in which death and resurrection are celebrated together.

These considerations are among the reasons why my re-visioning includes the removal of (most of) the passion narrative from the liturgy of Passion Sunday. The synoptic passion narratives (suitably emended and selected) would then be used on Good Friday in a four-year cycle of gospel readings.

A disadvantage of this suggestion would be that those who worship on Passion Sunday but not on Good Friday would not hear the passion narrative at all. But if and when they do hear the passion narrative, it would be on Good Friday and in a paschal context.

The Preeminence of John

The Good Friday liturgy today follows an ancient tradition in proclaiming exclusively the passion narrative according to John's gospel. (The lectionary also uses John almost exclusively on the Sundays of Lent and of the Easter season.) As already considered, the passion narratives of the synoptic gospels are read -- over three years -- on the preceding Sunday. Today this preeminence of John needs to be critically reexamined.

From early in the church's history until our own time it has been widely considered that John's gospel was especially theological or spiritual, while the synoptic gospels were primarily historical in character. Even today some commentators write as if John's passion narrative were the only one suitable for use on Good Friday.

Recent biblical scholarship has shown that all four gospels are intensely theological in character -- and there is also an increased appreciation of historicity in John. At present, therefore, the church is deprived on Good Friday of the distinctive theological perspectives of Matthew, Mark and Luke regarding the cross and the paschal mystery. The present narrowness of theological vision seems disrespectful of the breadth of biblical revelation, and a disservice to the Christian people. As an alternative, I would therefore suggest that all four passion narratives be used in the Good Friday liturgy, in a four-year cycle.

Soteriological Issues

How the Good Friday liturgy expresses the meaning and significance of Jesus' death deserves the most careful attention. How did his death on the cross accomplish what it did? How did Jesus "save," and what does "save" mean? What is the relationship between cross and resurrection?

The writers of the Christian scriptures used a wide range of concepts and terms to describe the meaning of Jesus death and resurrection and to name their significance; John McIntyre, for example, lists thirteen such concepts. None of the biblical authors, however, gives a comprehensive treatment of this subject; the language of none is definitive in this regard.

Over the course of time, theologians likewise have offered a variety of theories regarding soteriology or the doctrine of atonement. The Roman Catholic church has never defined this doctrine officially and has never formally adopted one particular theory.

It remains true, however, that the soteriological theory of Anselm of Canterbury (11th century) has been widely accepted for the last thousand years (in Anselm's own words, or in theories derived from his, or in popular expressions of his views). Though abandoned by many contemporary theologians, an anselmian soteriology remains prominent at the popular level and in the Catholic liturgy -- including the liturgy of Good Friday.

Anthony Tambasco speaks of a "popular soteriology" based on Anselm. Though I make no attempt to provide a complete description of this view here, the following phrases and images indicate major themes and prevalent images:

- satisfaction, purchase, ransom; suffering, obedience, sacrifice;
- God as angry and as judge; legalistic; recompense for injured honor; propitiation;

- merit and reward; punishment; centered only on the death of Jesus;
- personal and individualistic; related to medieval and feudal culture.

Anselm's soteriology is expressed in the present Roman Catholic liturgy of Good Friday in a number of ways. Thus the opening prayer speaks of Jesus "shedding his blood for us" and "by the suffering of Christ your Son, you have saved us all from the death we inherited from sinful Adam." The first reading lays great stress on suffering, vicarious atonement and the obedience of the Servant = Jesus. The second reading has to do with sacrifice and refers to obedience and suffering. The reproaches stress the suffering of Jesus.

Popular and liturgical anselmian soteriology may be criticized on a number of grounds. It is not very biblical, not paschal (that is, respectful and inclusive of the resurrection), uses negative images of God, ignores Jesus' active ministry and the preaching of the reign of God, is culturally biased (in terms of medieval, feudal culture), is focused on suffering, involves a misunderstanding of Jewish sacrifice, is individualistic and not social or communal, is difficult to link to social justice, and appears to justify mistreatment of women and children.

As mentioned above, this soteriology has been abandoned by many contemporary theologians. Thus Roger Haight, in his book, *Jesus: Symbol of God* (1999), surveys the history of soteriology and considers the symbolic stories and symbolic language in which these have been expressed. He then concludes that "ultimately these salvation theories and the New Testament accounts of salvation are interpretations of Jesus. Many of them appear today as bizarre, extravagant, and at times grotesque." (p 237)

Haight proposes

a series of eight propositions that try to capture the experience of salvation that this symbolic language contains and evokes. This is an explicit hermeneutical effort to transform a mythological language that is hardly appreciated today into more direct statements of the ways in which Jesus mediates the experience of salvation.

[His synopsis follows:]

Jesus reveals God, and the God he reveals is the loving creator God who is also savior. All classical authors include this aspect of what Jesus did for our salvation. Some also stress the embodiment of God by Jesus; especially divinization theories emphasize that Jesus makes this God present. The presence of God in and to Jesus means that Jesus represents God. This proposition is crucial for understanding what is going on in much of classical soteriological language. Because Christians encounter God in Jesus, Jesus becomes a representative and bearer of God to the Christian imagination. Jesus' love and concern represents God's love; Jesus' fidelity in this mission through death and into resurrection represents God's commitment to human existence. This logic explains how Christians can see in Jesus' death not only a dramatic act of human fidelity to God, but

also God's love for humankind. Symbolically Jesus carried God's fidelity to human existence. And Jesus' resurrection is salvific because it meets human hope with a content that fulfills human existence.

Jesus also reveals human existence. Picking up the theme of the final Adam, Jesus represents a paradigm of human values and goals. This exemplarism is a constant theme in classical soteriology. Jesus appeals to disciples and offers absolute meaning and fulfillment to such a commitment and way of life. But this exemplarism is based on symbolic mediation: "Christ is, first of all, a 'sacrament' (*sacramentum*), only secondly an 'example' (*exemplorum*)." All of this must be read within the context of the religious question or the question of salvation. Only those who experience the need and ask the question can grasp God's saving forgiveness and reconciliation manifested in Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection. (p. 342)

Contemporary theologians offer a variety of soteriological theories, all of which need to be considered in the re-visioning of the Good Friday liturgy.

Several other issues need also be named at this point.

1. Johannine soteriology. Though the distinctive johannine narrative of Christ's passion is read in the Good Friday liturgy, I wonder if John's particular message is really heard. That is, John's theology is not that of Anselm, but in the Good Friday liturgy John is accompanied by -- and therefore interpreted by -- the soteriology of Anselm. Which do worshipers hear? Are they aware that they are hearing two distinct views?

2. We need to be clear what John's distinctive message really is and be sure that it is expressed authentically and with integrity, even if other theologies are present as well.

Donald Senior summarizes the central messages of John's passion narrative in the following headings:

Through the Passion John's Gospel proclaims that the death of Jesus, as an act of total self-donation, is the ultimate revelation of God's redemptive love for the world.

The death of Jesus is the victorious culmination of Jesus' mission, the "hour of glory" triumphantly leading him back to God.

From his cross Jesus stands in judgment over the powers of darkness and death and defeats them; at the same time the power of the cross becomes a norm of judgment on all other expressions of power.

The death of Jesus has redemptive value and from the Crucified Jesus new life streams into the World.

The crisis of the Passion reveals the meaning of faith and the cost of discipleship. The cross of Jesus gives new meaning to the Christian encounter with death. (pp 144-166)

Sandra Schneiders describes John's central message in these ways:

Therefore, John describes God's salvific intention not in terms of sacrifice or retribution but in terms of self-gift: God so loved the world as to give God's only Son to save us (see 3:16). Jesus, acting out of that salvific mission, so loved his own in the world that he laid down his life for them (see 10:17-18; 13:1). Jesus' self-gift was not, in John's perspective, the master's redemption of unworthy slaves but an act of friendship: "no longer do I call you servants . . . you I have called friends" (15:15). (p 172)

Because salvation is revelation in the Fourth Gospel, the great trilogy of Johannine terms—life, light, and love—captures the entire dynamic. Jesus, as Son of God, has been given God's own life in all its fullness and has been authorized by God to give that life to whomever he wills (see 5:21, 26). In Jesus as Word incarnate that life of God blazes forth, becomes available, is manifested, as light shines in the darkness (1:4-5). And those who receive it, who are enlightened by this light, who come to Jesus and remain in him, participate in the love-life between Jesus and God. As Jesus says in this final prayer, such disciples know that God has "loved them even as you [God] have loved me" (17:23).

The life of Jesus in which his disciples participate is the life of children of God, divine filiation. Since the disciples share Jesus' filiation, they not only can call God their Father (see 20:17) and Jesus' mother their own (see 19:25-27), as Jesus did, but they also become sisters and brothers of Jesus and of one another. The intense love-ethic of the Johannine community is rooted in this fraternal/sororal relationship, which is the fruit of Jesus' sharing of his life with them. (p 54)

3. The Cross. The Good Friday liturgy necessarily speaks of "the cross," but what exactly is meant by this term? It can be understood narrowly and literally, as referring to the instrument of Jesus' death. It can also be understood more broadly and symbolically, as referring to the entire mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection. In a similar way it can be used to refer to the entire sacrament or visible sign of Christ's saving life, death and resurrection.

Anselmian soteriology views "the cross" in a narrow and literal way. It seems to me that modern theology requires -- or is aided by -- its use as a metonym to refer to the entire paschal mystery. The challenge is how to make this clear.

4. Women. It is important to make clear that the life, death and resurrection have significance for women as well as men; that women played a role in the passion story (indeed a more positive role than the male disciples); that Jesus lived, died and was raised for the salvation

of women as well as men; and that equality and friendship among women and men is part of the message of Jesus and of John's gospel.

A re-visioning of the Good Friday liturgy requires that we take all of these considerations into account, without thereby trying to turn this liturgy into a theology classroom. At the very least, expressions of anselmian soteriology should be deleted from this liturgy. It should instead express a range of contemporary or alternative soteriological views, and be open to a wide variety of interpretations. The soteriology so expressed should be more biblical in character and language. If a four-year cycle of Good Friday liturgies is planned, then there would be more opportunity to express a variety of views. When Matthew's passion narrative is used, for example, it might be more appropriate to use the Fourth Servant Song, which is a significant influence for this gospel.

Unified Christology

In his book, *The Resurrection of Jesus: New Considerations for its Theological Interpretation* (1997), Kenan B. Osborne raises up the goal of a "unified christology." This would integrate all aspects of Jesus' life and ministry, including "the preexistence of Jesus and the infancy narratives, the message and life-style of Jesus in his public ministry, the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus, and the resurrection narratives of Jesus. I quote from the summary of his chapter 4.

1. Too many formulations of a christology appear to be disunified and at times even schizophrenic. There is not a clear connection for the preexistence/infancy narratives of the New Testament, the life and ministry of Jesus together with his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, and the resurrection material. These three areas of New Testament thought need a clearer unity for a christology to be credible.

2. The preexistence and infancy narrative sections lend themselves rather easily to mesh with the main section of all four gospels: the public life and public ministry of Jesus. The theological interpretations given to the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus have, in the course of Christian history, often been the interpretations that tend to cause the most disunity, since they introduce themes that one does not find in the message of Jesus' preaching and the message of Jesus' public life.

3. Besides this lack of integration, the arrest, trial, and death of Jesus have at times been presented as a "good work" that effects God's grace. Often such presentations, both in theological liturgy and in liturgical phrasings, clash with the decree on justification promulgated by the Council of Trent. At times christological presentations both in theology and in liturgical celebration seem oblivious of what Trent officially stated in this decree.

4. Since most contemporary biblical scholars and most theologians who have written serious material on christology claim that the core of Jesus' message can be symbolically stated - the kingdom of God is at hand -- it would seem that this center, even though it is seen as a tensive symbol, and even though other words could be substituted for "kingdom," would well serve as a unifying thread for a credible christology.

5. Serious Roman Catholic theologians are currently moving in this same direction, and although each does so in a slightly different way, the fact that there is this theological rethinking of the "entire Jesus-event," from his conception to his resurrection, indicates quite strongly that some time-honored christologies as well as some current christologies are disunified. The main effort at present in christological research and writing is to formulate a unified christology.

Osborne also states:

If the message and life of Jesus, during his public years, were centered on the view that The "kingdom" of God has begun and therefore evil in principle is overcome; that the Spirit of God has returned and in abundance; and that the marginalized are major players in any understanding of this "kingdom," then my own position would read as follows:

In the arrest, trial, suffering, and death of Jesus we hear once again the message of Jesus' life and ministry:

- a. The kingdom of God is present even in the suffering and death of Jesus.
- b. The evil of such suffering and death is not ultimate.
- c. The Holy Spirit makes every death, even crucifixion, holy.
- d. A marginalized person, such as Jesus, in his suffering and death speaks in a major way about God's gracious love to those who are similarly marginalized. (pp 171-2)

Osborne is conscious of the liturgical expression of a "dis-united christology" and the need for the Good Friday, Easter and other liturgies to speak of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and to interpret the individual mysteries they celebrate in light of the "kingdom of God." I have not systematically tried to address his concerns, but some of the suggestions I made may be in the right direction.

Conclusion

The points raised here need to be studied more thoroughly and expressed in greater detail and with greater sophistication. They also need to be taken into consideration in evaluating the present Good Friday liturgy and in thinking about eventual revision.

Sources and Selected Resources

I have not tried in any way to make a thorough survey of the literature on this subject; in addition I have not tried consistently to document or reference the text except for direct quotations. Here I list only sources and other materials that were particularly helpful.

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