

Good Friday WE CONTEMPLATED A LOVE STRONGER THAN DEATH

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Introduction

The dramatic agony on the cross has often led the preachers of the past to dwell excessively on the gory aspects of Jesus' passion. From this preaching, images, popular representations, and devotions that aggravate the violence of the blows, the scourging, the falling under the weight of the cross, the sadism of the exasperated soldiers, are derived.



This type of approach to the Gospel texts does a disservice to the understanding of the Easter events. Indeed, it blurs the meaning. The Gospels are moving towards an entirely different perspective. They are sober in relating the horrendous torment inflicted on Jesus. Their goal is not to impress or move the readers but to give them an understanding into the immensity of God's love revealed in Christ. They do not linger on the suffering because the passion they present is not that of suffering but the passion of love. They want to show us that:

“For love is strong as death

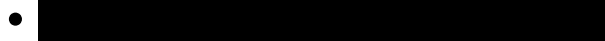
its jealousy lasting as the power of death

it burns like a blazing fire

*it blazes like a mighty flame.
No flood can extinguish love
nor river submerge it.
If a man were to buy love
with all the wealth of his house
contempt is all he would purchase” (Song 8:6-7).*

In presenting the gory aspects of the passion, John is the soberest of all the evangelists. He skips the humiliating details about the blows to the head and spitting on him. He refers only to the flagellation and slapping. His story—the meditation of today’s liturgy—does not narrate the journey of Jesus to his death but glory.

With Christ on the cross, we understand where sin leads to rendering a person unrecognizable. But immediately, John has us contemplate God’s response to sin is the gift of his Spirit and the resurrection of the Holy and Just One.



“Lord, make me understand how great your passion for love is.”

First Reading: Isaiah 52:13–53:12

See, my servant shall prosper, he shall be raised high and greatly exalted. Even as many were amazed at him—so marred was his look beyond human semblance, and his appearance beyond that of the sons of man—so shall he startle many nations, because of him kings shall stand speechless; for those who have not been told shall see, those who have not heard shall ponder it.

Who would believe what we have heard? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up like a sapling before him, like a shoot from the parched earth; there was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him, nor appearance that would attract us to him. He was spurned and avoided by people, a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity, one of those from whom people hide their faces, spurned, and we held him in no esteem.

Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured, while we thought of him as stricken, as one smitten by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins; upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed. We had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way; but the Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all.

Though he was harshly treated, he submitted and opened not his mouth; like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearers, he was silent and opened not his mouth. Oppressed and condemned, he was taken away, and who would have thought any more of his destiny? When he was cut off from the land of the living, and smitten for the sin of his people, a grave was assigned him among the wicked and a burial place with evildoers, though he had done no wrong nor spoken any falsehood. But the Lord was pleased to crush him in infirmity.

If he gives his life as an offering for sin, he shall see his descendants in a long life, and the will of the Lord shall be accomplished through him.

Because of his affliction he shall see the light in fullness of days; through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear. Therefore I will give him his portion among the great, and he shall divide the spoils with the mighty, because he surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked; and he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses. —The Word of the Lord.

To usher us into the culminating moments of Jesus' life, today we are offered one of the most famous texts of the Old Testament: the fourth song of the Servant of the Lord. Servant of God in the Bible is an honorific title reserved for eminent men like Moses and David (Exodus 14:31; Ps 89:21) and, above all, for an anonymous character who appears in the book of Isaiah called the Servant of the Lord.

He is an enigmatic figure. First, the prophet puts his vocation to the fore. He was called to be the light, first of Israel and, later, of all peoples. Then he recalls his commitment to carrying out the mission entrusted to him by God, his disappointment at the lack of understanding and failure, and finally, the tragic end of his life. He was sentenced to a shameful death.

After his death, a disturbing question surfaced in the disciples' hearts: was he or was he not the messenger of God? If he was innocent, why did God want him to suffer? Why didn't he intervene to protect him?

A disciple who, at length and in silence, reflected on the tragic story of the teacher, responds calmly, in the fourth and final act of the drama: He was innocent, and in his favor, God performed an unprecedented miracle. This disciple's meditation is reported in the central part of the reading (Isaiah 53:1-11a). Finally, he is introduced (Is 52:13-15) and completed (Is

53:11b-12) in the Lord's words, who delivers his judgment on events involving his faithful Servant.

God, from the beginning, states that contrary to all appearances, his Servant will succeed (v. 13). His appearance is indeed disfigured to the point that whoever approaches him remains scared because he does not even appear as a man (v. 14). Yet it happened—and one day everyone will experience it for themselves—an unheard fact, so extraordinary as to leave the same rulers of the world astonished (v. 15).

What miracle? It is not told. But today, re-reading this text in the light of Easter, we can recognize the Servant of the Lord unmistakably—as did the early Christians (Acts 8:30-35)—the figure of Jesus.

At this point, the moving meditation of a disciple begins (Is 52:1-11a). He speaks on behalf of all those who—like him—have lived next to the Servant, and they were witnesses to his integrity.

We ask, “*Who can believe* our announcement?” (v. 1). We have seen a spectacular enterprise accomplished by the arm of the Lord; we saw a prodigy sufficiently extraordinary for many to find incredible. Yet, even for us, it is not easy to understand God’s intervention in the history of his faithful Servant. Only later, in reflection and silence, were we able to grasp the meaning of what had happened. Now we will continue to proclaim what we have seen, though perhaps none or only a scant few will believe in our proclamation.

Here is his story.

It blossomed like a sapling in a dry land (v. 2). Thus begins the story of the Servant’s life. He has no name, his place of origin and ancestry are unknown. Nevertheless, he belongs to humanity, a citizen of the world, a world that appears like a lifeless desert. Then he grew up, and immediately pain and humiliation were his companions (vv. 2-3). He had nothing attractive in his appearance, no beauty—nothing that attracts people's admiration, riches, power of success—was despised because, according to human criteria, he was of no account. Because of his failure, he was even considered one punished by God, one from whom it is good to stay away. Yet his pain that seemed absurd made sense: His wounds have healed us.

His suffering has opened our eyes (vv. 4-5), showing us to what vileness sin sinks. His pains have made us realize how foolish our paths have followed and led us to wisdom (v. 6). They have transmitted to us a message that will change the world, a truth ignored by the friends of Job and by all the wisdom of the East: sin is committed not by those who suffer, but by those who make others suffer; and the liberation of one who, suffering wrongdoing, does not respond by recovering evil.

The new world is not born of those who—like Lamech—respond to injustice with threatening reprisals, but by those who—like Abel and the Servant—break up the vicious cycle of evil with

love, leaving him to bear it alone.

The Servant gave this message, not with words, but with his life, with his grief: *“Oppressed, he resisted, did not open his mouth; like a lamb led to the slaughter, like a dumb sheep before one who shears him, he opened not his mouth”* (v. 7).

Peter understood exceptionally well the message of this poem. Addressing the servants who often were subjected to humiliation by their masters, he urged them thus: *“Christ who suffered for you, leaving you an example that you may follow in his way. He did no wrong, and there was no deceit in his mouth. He did not return insult for insult and, when suffering, he did not curse but put himself in the hands of God who judges justly. He went to the cross bearing our sins in his own body on the cross so that we might die to sin and live an upright life. For by his wounds you have been healed. You were like stray sheep, but you have come back to the Shepherd and guardian of your souls”* (1 P 2:21-25).

After speaking of the Servant’s pain, the disciple tells how he arrived at his conviction: *“With violence and without trial he was taken away”* (v. 8). The injustice was committed by people, not by God; they were the ones who pronounced the unjust sentence. First, they killed him, then *“made his tomb with the wicked, put him in the graveyard of the oppressors”* (v. 9a).

They threw his remains in the mass grave of the executed, convinced that they have ended his story forever and have erased his memory from the earth. Not a plaque with an inscription was placed on his grave, and his name has been forgotten. His disciple, however, has left us, almost like an epitaph, a solemn statement: *“He had done no violence nor spoken in deceit”* (v. 9b). This recognition does him justice and honors him more than any monument.

The opponents of the Servant have decided to get rid not only of him but also of his posterity. Therefore, they have resorted to crime to erase his message and his proposal of life.

Is everything, therefore, over? In the last part of his reflection (vv. 10-11a), the disciple reveals the mysterious plan of God: the silent passion of the Servant will realize the salvation project of the Lord. His name will not be obliterated but will have endless posterity.

The reading ends (vv. 11b-12) with the Lord’s judgment that confirms what was said by the disciple. The passion of the Servant will introduce God’s justice to the world, and all shall know the Lord; that is, they will welcome as a model of man what they saw embodied in the Servant.

Second Reading: Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

Brothers and sisters: Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who

is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.

In the days when Christ was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. —The Word of the Lord.

Ben Sirach recommended to the disciple: “*Son ... accept all that happens to you, be patient when you are humbled, for as gold is tested in the fire so those acceptable to God are tested in the crucible of humiliation*”(Sir 2:1,4-5). There is no mention in the Bible of the wicked being tempted by God; temptation is a privilege reserved for the just because it is how their loyalty is stimulated to grow.

Being a truly righteous man, Jesus could not be saved from temptation. The Synoptic Gospels tell us that, at the beginning of his public life, he was tested by Satan. Mark reports this in just two verses. Then, Luke and Matthew further develop the theme. To give readers a deeper understanding of the temptations that accompanied Jesus throughout his life, they introduce three parables that image the temptations of power, of having and of exhibitionism, which we also ought to confront.

The author of the reading’s passage takes up the argument and indicates the significance Jesus’ temptations have for our lives. Having been tried in all things like us, he can understand our weaknesses. But, there is only one difference between him and us: while we often are unfaithful to God, he had never given in to temptation; he was never even touched by sin.

The fact that he, too, has passed through our vicissitudes makes us feel really close to him, for he is sensitive to our problems and understanding of our mistakes.

The most challenging tests he faced were in Gethsemane and on the cross. The evangelist, Mark, reports that at the Mount of Olives, Jesus “*began to feel dismayed and anguish*” of the tragedy that was about to involve him, and this frightened him (Mk 13:33). He was upset because, at the end of his life, he understood the failure of his work: both the people and his disciples had not adhered to his proposal. He has undoubtedly asked himself whether it made sense that his existence, dedicated to building a new world, would end that way. What use could his death have?

Here is the temptation, the doubt that failure and defeat would not help change the world. Was it worth sacrificing his life, or was it better to run away as at other times he had been forced to

(Jn 8:39; 11:54)? Finally, the last temptation, the one that shines from the cry on the cross: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Mk 15:34).

In the second part of the reading (Heb 5:7-9), another consoling truth for us is communicated: from the things that he suffered, Jesus learned how hard it is to obey the Father. Therefore, we can have recourse to him with confidence, certain that if we pray with him and accept his Spirit, we will not be exempted from fatigue and trials, but we will have his strength to overcome them.

Gospel: John 18:1–19:42

Jesus went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to where there was a garden, into which he and his disciples entered. Judas his betrayer also knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. So Judas got a band of soldiers and guards from the chief priests and the Pharisees and went there with lanterns, torches and weapons. Jesus, knowing everything that was going to happen to him, went out and said to them,

“Whom are you looking for?”

They answered him,

“Jesus the Nazorean.”

Jesus said to them,

“I AM.”

Judas his betrayer was also with them. When Jesus said to them, “I AM,” they turned away and fell to the ground. So Jesus again asked them,

“Whom are you looking for?”

They said,

“Jesus the Nazorean.”

Jesus answered,

“I told you that I AM. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.”

This was to fulfill what Jesus had said, “I have not lost any of those you gave me.” Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter,

“Put your sword into its scabbard. Shall I not drink the cup that the Father gave me?”

So the band of soldiers, the tribune, and the Jewish guards seized Jesus, bound him, and brought him to Annas first. Annas was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. It was Caiaphas who had counseled the Jews that it was better that one man should die rather than the people.

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Now the other disciple was known to the high priest, and he entered the courtyard of the high priest with Jesus. But Peter stood at the gate outside. So the other disciple, the acquaintance of the high priest, went out and spoke to the gatekeeper and brought Peter in. Then the maid who was the gatekeeper said to Peter,

“You are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?”

Peter said,

“I am not.”

Now the slaves and the guards were standing around a charcoal fire that they had made, because it was cold, and were warming themselves. Peter was also standing there keeping warm.

The high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his doctrine. Jesus answered him,

“I have spoken publicly to the world. I have always taught in a synagogue or in the temple area where all the Jews gather, and in secret I have said nothing. Why ask me? Ask those who heard me what I said to them. They know what I said.”

When Jesus had said this, one of the temple guards standing there struck him and said,

“Is this the way you answer the high priest?”

Jesus answered him,

“If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?”

Then Annas sent Jesus bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Now Simon Peter was standing there keeping warm. And they said to Peter,

“You are not one of his disciples, are you?”

Peter denied it and said,

“I am not.”

One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the one whose ear Peter had cut off, said,

“Didn’t I see you in the garden with him?”

Again Peter denied it. And immediately the cock crowed.

Then they brought Jesus from Caiaphas to the praetorium. It was morning. And they themselves did not enter the praetorium, in order not to be defiled so that they could eat the Passover. So Pilate came out to them and said,

“What charge do you bring against this man?”

They answered and said to Pilate,

“If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.”

At this, Pilate said to them,

“Take him yourselves, and judge him according to your law.”

The Jews answered him,

“We do not have the right to execute anyone,”

in order that the word of Jesus might be fulfilled that he said indicating the kind of death he would die. So Pilate went back into the praetorium and summoned Jesus and said to him,

“Are you the King of the Jews?”

Jesus answered,

“Do you say this on your own or have others told you about me?”

Pilate answered,

“I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?”

Jesus answered,

“My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here.”

So Pilate said to Jesus,

“Then you are a king?”

Jesus answered,

“You say I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Pilate said to Jesus,

“What is truth?”

When Pilate had said this, he again went out to the Jews and said to them,

“I find no guilt in him. But you have a custom that I release one prisoner to you at Passover. Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?”

They cried out again,

“Not this one but Barabbas!”

Now Barabbas was a revolutionary.

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him scourged. And the soldiers wove a crown out of thorns and placed it on his head, and clothed him in a purple cloak, and they came to him and said,

“Hail, King of the Jews!”

And they struck him repeatedly. Once more Pilate went out and said to them,

“Look, I am bringing him out to you, so that you may know that I find no guilt in him.”

So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple cloak. And Pilate said to them,

“Behold, the man!”

When the chief priests and the guards saw Jesus they cried out,

“Crucify him, crucify him!”

Pilate said to them,

“Take him yourselves and crucify him. I find no guilt in him.”

The Jews answered,

“We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God.”

Now when Pilate heard this statement, he became even more afraid, and went back into the praetorium and said to Jesus,

“Where are you from?”

Jesus did not answer him. So Pilate said to him,

“Do you not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?”

Jesus answered him,

“You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above. For this reason the one who handed me over to you has the greater sin.”

Consequently, Pilate tried to release Jesus; but the Jews cried out,

“If you release him, you are not a friend of Caesar.

Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.”

When Pilate heard these words he brought Jesus out and seated him on the judge’s bench in the place called Stone Pavement, in Hebrew, Gabbatha. It was Preparation Day for Passover, and it

was about noon.

And Pilate said to the Jews.

“Behold, your king!”

They cried out,

“Take him away, take him away! Crucify him!”

Pilate said to them,

“Shall I crucify your king?”

The chief priests answered,

“We have no king but Caesar.”

Then Pilate handed Jesus over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus, and, carrying the cross himself, Jesus went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, in Hebrew, Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus in the middle. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, “Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews.” Now many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate,

“Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that he said, ‘I am the King of the Jews.’”

Pilate answered,

“What I have written, I have written.”

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four shares, a share for each soldier. They also took his tunic, but the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top down. So they said to one another,

“Let’s not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it will be,”

in order that the passage of Scripture might be fulfilled that says: *They divided my garments among them, and for my vesture they cast lots.* This is what the soldiers did.

Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved he said to his mother,

“Woman, behold, your son.”

Then Jesus said to the disciple,

“Behold, your mother.”

And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.

After this, aware that everything was now finished, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus said,

“I thirst.”

There was a vessel filled with common wine. So they put a sponge soaked in wine on a sprig of hyssop and put it up to Jesus' mouth. When Jesus had taken the wine, he said,

“It is finished.”

And bowing his head, Jesus handed over the spirit.

(Here all kneel down and pause for a short time.)

Now since it was Preparation Day, in order that the bodies might not remain on the cross on the sabbath, for the sabbath day of that week was a solemn one, the Jews asked Pilate that their legs be broken and that they be taken down. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and then of the other one who was crucified with Jesus. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs, but one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out. The eyewitness has testified, and his testimony is true; he knows that he is speaking the truth, so that you also may come to believe. For this happened so that the Scripture passage might be fulfilled: *Not a bone of it will be broken.* And again another passage says: *They will look upon him whom they have pierced.*

After this, Joseph of Arimathea, secretly a disciple of Jesus for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate if he could remove the body of Jesus. And Pilate permitted it. So Joseph came and took Jesus'

body.

Nicodemus, the one who had first come to him at night, also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about one hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and bound it with burial cloths along with the spices, according to the Jewish burial custom.

Now in the place where Jesus had been crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had yet been buried. So they laid Jesus there because of the Jewish Preparation Day; for the tomb was close by. —The Gospel of the Lord.

All four evangelists devote two chapters to the story of the passion and death of Jesus. They refer to the same dramatic events. Although their versions of events are not identical and cannot be put together into one perfectly consistent story from the historical perspective, they essentially agree. The differences come from the particular sensitivity of each evangelist, for which some episodes are narrated by one and ignored by others; some details left out by the Synoptics are instead developed by John.

The goal of the evangelists was not to keep a written record, report of events, or chronicle of the facts identical in every detail, but to nourish the faith of the believers and enlighten them about the significance of the events during Easter. The absurd death of Jesus caught the disciples unprepared. It had aroused in them disturbing questions, the same ones we ask ourselves today: is it wise to trust a loser who was betrayed and denied by his own friends? Does it make sense to take a man as a model that legitimate religious authorities have deemed a blasphemer and that the Roman procurator sentenced to execution as a criminal? Do we admit that he was a persecuted just man, but why didn't God intervene to defend him?

With the passion narrative, John, more than giving us information on how the events took place, wants to help us understand the meaning of what had happened. Before going into the details of the message that this evangelist intends to communicate, it is necessary to preface a reflection on the reasons why Jesus was executed. To those who have internalized some relatively superficial image of his person, his death can only be completely absurd. How can one who cures the sick, embraces and caresses the children, loves the poor, and became a servant of all be killed?

Must his death then be attributed to a mysterious will of the Father who, to forgive man's sin, needed to see the blood of the righteous? This kind of explanation cannot even be considered. Why, then, was Jesus crucified? In that sense, did he give his life for us? From which bondage has he delivered us by giving himself into the hands of men?

John indicates the reason for the hostility that has been unleashed against him from the first page of his Gospel: Jesus was the light, "*the light that shines in the darkness, light that*

darkness could not overcome” (Jn 1:4-5). “He was the true light that enlightens everyone” (John 1:9), “but people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

Some rays of this light that illuminated the night of the world have been particularly intense and provocative. They have enlightened the hearts of the simple people showering them joy and hope, but they annoyed those who preferred to act in darkness. Four of these rays appeared particularly unbearable to the holders of religious and political power.

The first was the face of God shown by Jesus.

The spiritual leaders of Israel put aside the sweet images of God, husband, and father preached by the prophets. Instead, they had educated the people to believe in a legislative and strict judging God, ready to unleash reprisals and retaliation against those who transgress his commands.

The God preached by Jesus is the Father and is good, just good. We turn to him with the simplicity and confidence of a child because he reserves the same tenderness to whoever accepts his word and whoever rejects it (Mt 5:45). He feeds the birds of heaven and clothes the lilies of the field (Mt 6:25-31), counts the hairs of our head, and knows our needs before asking him (Mt 6: 8). No one, not even the worst sinner, may fear Him. He *“so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world; instead, through him, the world is to be saved”* (Jn 3:16-17).

Nothing is more subversive to the mentality of the scribes and Pharisees who have built a God in their own image, a God who does not want to have anything to do with tax collectors and sinners. For these spiritual leaders, Jesus is a fool and a heretic (John 8:48), a blasphemer to be stoned (Jn 8:59; 10:31,39), be taken away, at the earliest possible time, because he is a danger to the faith handed down by the fathers and leads the simple people astray.

A second new ray of light is projected on false religion.

There i

Fernando Armellini