

Meditating on Christ's Passion (A Forgotten Art: For Preachers and the Entire Congregation)

By: Robert Kolb

Appropriating medieval forms of writing that had fostered lay piety in his youth became one of Martin Luther's earliest means of spreading his message. In early 1519 he adapted the genre which aided people in meditating on Christ's passion. This quite popular little treatise began with cautions about the misuse of such meditation. The tendency to think of Christ on the cross as an occasion for malicious thoughts, particularly against Jewish people, serves only sinners who are trying to avert their gaze from Calvary (Luther's Works 42:7). Neither in our time do we dare turn Christ's suffering and death into an excuse to condemn those who play loosely with human life, whether with guns, surgical instruments, or "self-delivery" medications, while we ignore our own leaden foot and our poisoning of our own livers.

Pitying poor, hurting Jesus does much the same thing. We can gnash our teeth over the horrendous suffering He had to endure. But if we feel at all, we feel the nails going into His feet rather than piecing our own hearts. Luther advised such people to weep for themselves and their children, as Jesus had recommended to the women of Jerusalem (Luke 23:27-31).

Lenten meditation is the one time Luther might advise us to be turning in upon ourselves—and taking a cold, honest glance. For only in the shadow of the Cross can we look honestly into the true cause of the death of the man from Nazareth, the second person of the Holy Trinity. In our own plans for life, fashioned apart from our fear, love, and trust in God above all else, we identify the basis of the indictment He took with Him to the cross. For our sakes He left that blood-soaked document nailed to His cross, illegible because of the dark red stains (Colossians 2:14). "They contemplate Christ's passion who view it with a terror-stricken heart and a despairing conscience," Luther commented (Luther's Works 42:8). "For the main benefit of Christ's passion is that a person sees into his own true self and is terrified and crushed by this" (Luther's Works 42:10).

Luther's own preaching took the Savior's death most seriously, for it has disposed of our sin so that His resurrection could restore our righteousness and set us on the path which follows Him (Romans 4:25, 6:3-11). However, he did not dwell on the suffering of Christ in his sermons. He knew well the specifics of the Lord's horrendous, brutal, vicious treatment at the hands of temple police and Roman soldiers and the contemptuous mockery of officials from the region as well as officers of the occupation. But unlike some medieval preachers and writers, he did not elaborate on these details of stinging physical pain and intense mental anguish our Lord suffered. Contemplation of the suffering of Jesus, for Luther, avoided focusing on gory details and pondering pain. He recognized how the evangelists and apostles did not suggest that salvation comes through the number of drops of blood He shed. The Law demanded not just blood but the outpouring of blood unto the death which sin has earned (Romans 6:23a). Therefore, Luther did not waste time scratching the consciences of hearers and readers. He went for their jugulars. His intention was to kill, "strangling the old Adam and banishing all joy, delight, and confidence which people could derive from other creatures," by creating the feeling Christ felt as He was abandoned by His heavenly Father. For Luther reached his intended goal when his hearers returned to their baptisms and experienced again their new birth and the peace and joy of the new creature (Luther's Works 42:11).

A decade after writing this treatise, the reformer preached on John 19:38 (the only sermon I know on the theme of Christ's tomb). It drove home the baptismal implications of Jesus'

suffering. In one of the monologues he often used to place thoughts directly into the thinking of his hearers, he portrayed the person contemplating Christ's burial as saying, "If Christ has died and been buried for me, then there is nothing lacking: all my sin, misery, and affliction are buried with him. Therefore, my heart is confident and unafraid. Even if temptation and affliction shall come, my heart hopes without any hesitation in my Lord Jesus Christ, who has buried all my sin and affliction."

The preacher told the Wittenberg congregation that the burial and tomb of Jesus gave foundation to the baptismal promise of death to sin and burial of sinful identity: "so that we are able to find comfort in all attacks [from Satan] and affliction... For this reason, Christ's tomb is also called and is indeed a holy sepulcher, not because of its painted façade or magnificent architecture [that were erected for medieval children's plays and puppet shows] but because all our sin, misery, wretchedness, death, and damnation lie buried in it and because it makes our own graves holy." Therefore, Luther told his hearers, "We may say with the heart's true confidence, 'in this tomb lie all my sins and iniquity.'" He suggested addressing Christ's tomb with a kiss and a believing heart, saying, "Thank you, dear grave, because my Lord Jesus Christ is buried in you. All my sins lie buried, therefore, in you. For Christ died and was buried for me, and thus I can depend upon His death and grave" (Luther's Works 69:277).

In the suffering of the Word made flesh, Luther heard both the Law's condemnation of our straying from Him and the Gospel's liberation from the condemnation and wrath of God which sets us free to be His children and the agents of His love. Meditation on our Lord's passion leads, therefore, to much more than sorrow and empathy as we glance toward a green hill far away. It grasps as its own the death of our sinful identity as God's lethal promise and definitive coup-de-grace repeat themselves daily in our lives on the basis of our baptisms. Such meditation realizes that His death transformed how our Creator views and regards us. For Jesus' exhausted body and troubled mind trod from Pilate to Herod to Pilate to Golgotha taking the path belonging to us and claiming it as His own. He followed the path because He had a delivery to make at Calvary and on the property of Joseph of Arimathea. He conveyed our foul and rotting selves, suffering under the crushing burden of the weight of our defiance of our God. He dumped the old identities of us sinners in the landfill Joseph owned. Since we know now where our sins have been placed - in that tomb, buried forever - we notice our footsteps have a new spring in them, our joy in life a new vibrancy. In our time we are not sure how secure tombs for radioactive waste are, but we can be certain this tomb is escape-proof. If we encounter radiation of guilt coming back into our consciousness, we know it is fake news from the Devil, not the radiation of God's disgust with our sinfulness. That disgust got buried, too.

In 1519, Luther got very specific on how to think of Christ's suffering. "If pain or sickness afflicts you, consider how paltry this is in comparison with the thorny crown and the nails of Christ." We must recognize our Lord is present with us now in suffering just as He suffered then for us. Luther suggests that when circumstances of any kind prevent us from doing things we want to do, we should think on Christ's being bound and led back and forth. "If you are beset by pride, see how your Lord was mocked and ridiculed with criminals. If unchastity and lust assail you, remember how ruthlessly Christ's tender flesh was scourged, pierced, and beaten." Hatred, jealousy, and desire for revenge try to pollute the thinking of God's children, but they are to recall Christ who prayed for His enemies and wept for them as He weeps for us. Luther was repeating the medieval sentiment that Christ's sharing of our world of grief, misery, anguish and pain provides comfort in our distress, tribulation, and loneliness, giving us

“strength and encouragement... against every vice and failing.” This kind of comfort rests upon and arises out of the comfort that our very identity has been transformed by His death and resurrection. We were those who earned suffering by turning our backs on God and stopping our ears, so we no longer hearken to His Word. Through His passion, death, and resurrection we have become His faithful children, in whom He delights, with whom He is present in every suffering and every joy. Therefore, as Luther concluded at the end of his treatise, “Think on Him who endured such hostility from evil people against himself, so that you may be strengthened and not be weary at heart” (Hebrews 12:3). Indeed, “since Christ suffered in the flesh, strengthen and arm yourselves by meditating on this” (1 Peter 4:1) (Luther’s Works 42:13-14).