

Trinity College Cambridge
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Scenes from the Life of Christ: Suffering

Job 3: 1–16 Luke 23: 27–34

El Greco's 'Disrobing of Christ', Toledo Cathedral

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We may find it hard to believe, but the suffering of Christ, which is so central to our thoughts and reflections about him – and the subject of one of el Greco's greatest paintings, the 'Disrobing of Christ' – was, for a very long period of Christian history, of no very great interest to Christians.

I talked earlier in the term about 'semiotic overload' – that overwhelming bombardment with symbols which occurs, for example at Christmas, and is now upon us in a different guise with the commercial anticipation of Easter. Any day now it will be hard to venture outside the sanctuary of Trinity without encountering bunnies, eggs, chicks and the like, promiscuously partnered with crosses and garden tombs, in a wanton excess of ancient fertility spring-time symbolism, lightly sprinkled with a dash of Christianity. But Christians themselves may be thought some of the chief perpetrators of semiotic overload – for from when the cross went public, it so proliferated that being everywhere, it became, paradoxically perhaps, almost invisible, and thus nowhere. Only on account of its ubiquity and thus virtual invisibility could the cross – the Romans' most gruesome mode of execution – hang nonchalantly from ear rings or from chains around the neck; think of hanging a small electric chair from your ears, and the incongruence of it all should be apparent. However that may be, the proliferation of the cross, an outward and visible sign of the centrality of Christ's suffering to Christian thought and devotion, is a relatively recent occurrence – an invention of the 2nd half of Christianity's two thousand year existence.

If you look at earlier images, such as the one on the reverse of the el Greco, you find a distinct lack of interest in Christ's suffering. This, one of the very earliest depictions we have of Christ on the cross, does not conform to later expectations. It is one of four ivory carvings which made up the side of a small casket – now in the British museum, and probably made in Rome sometime between 420 and 430. The immediately preceding scene has Christ on his way to Golgotha – the cross is casually slung across his shoulder, and the sandaled and toga'd figure, with well-coiffured hair, looks to be undertaking a country walk rather than being marched to his death. In the image you have, a powerful, athletic figure, head held high and eyes open, confidently looks out at us, the halo about his head signalling the dignity of his composed and majestic death, contrasted with

Judas's ignominious suicide on the left. There is none of the pain or suffering or grief which we now associate with Christ's death – as it has been mediated to us through later paintings, but also through passion plays, through hymns, through prayers, through Bach's two great passions, and the like, all of which invite and require us to attend very closely to the agony and the pain.

A survey of Augustine's sermons (which you will be glad to know I won't attempt now), reveals the same, to us, puzzling lack of interest in the Christ's suffering. But add to the puzzle, if you will, the fact that in the telling of the stories of the early Christian martyrs, suffering is not much in evidence either, notwithstanding the dastardly antics of their typically increasingly incensed and frustrated would-be tormentors. Take the case of one of the foremost early martyrs, Lawrence. If you are ever in Rome you can visit one of the churches (I believe that there are three), where splashes from the fire which burnt St Lawrence in 258 have left marks in the rock. But Lawrence himself, though he was roasted on a grill, was magisterially serene and unperturbed, as the story is told – and is famously remembered for having quipped to his tormentors, 'turn me over, I think I am done on this side'. The only people who get hot under the collar, if you will forgive the expression, are the roasters, not the roastee. (It seems somewhat in poor taste that Lawrence became the patron saint of chefs and cooks, amongst others, but there it is and by the way.)

What our first image suggests, and what Augustine's sermons confirm, is just that although it was a point of orthodoxy that Christ was fully human and could and did suffer (he was not impassible, to use the technical term), this suffering wasn't of great interest – and in the case of the Christian martyrs, it gets airbrushed out of the picture.

Compare now the painting by el Greco. It is a world away from those sensibilities. We have the moment when Christ has arrived at Golgotha. A bending workman in the right foreground is busy drilling a hole at the foot of the cross to receive the nail which will pass through Christ's feet. A splendidly arrayed soldier, his armour reflecting the red of Christ's robe, stands to one side – in a somewhat bored manner, overseeing the proceedings. Below him in the left foreground, the three Maries observe the preparation of the cross, their anxious concern expressed in the touch of the hand on the shoulder of Christ's mother. Christ himself is bound and is being led, lamb-like, to the slaughter – the grim character who does the leading, in the green shirt, is about to pull the magnificent red robe from Christ. Behind Christ there are the two thieves, the one with a mocking expression, the other composed and serious. Behind them, there is a jostling, busy crowd of bystanders and soldiers, with helmets, feathers and lances – and impassive faces.

You will notice straight away that though Christ, at this point in the story, has been scourged, crowned with thorns and born the weight of the cross to Calvary, he shows no marks of any physical suffering or distress. El Greco invites us, I think, to contemplate another aspect of Christ's suffering, not his physical pain. Christ stands in the midst of the crowd, but is intently alone, his sorrowful eyes turned towards the heavens which seem to open way above his head. In the midst of this hostile crowd, he seems isolated and abandoned – there is certainly none of the masterful contempt of Lawrence and the other martyrs; none of the imperious impassivity of Christ in the early Christian depictions of his death. Instead el Greco wants us to see the pained sorrow and abject loneliness of one who has been betrayed and abandoned and who must now face the trials which are ahead of him with little in the way of human sympathy or comfort, but rather surrounded by the contempt, the indifference or the mockery, of those who encircle and envelop him. Any seeming impassibility is gone. Christ suffers and suffers particularly in his isolation and loneliness.

What is going on? How did we pass from the world of stoic, seemingly impassible martyrs, and that regal Christ on the cross, to dwelling on the reality, actuality and, in this picture, on very particular aspects of Christ's suffering? When and why did Christianity start to take that interest in Christ's suffering which we now take for granted?

Two forces were operative in bringing about the change – one theological, the other devotional.

The theological change was this – briefly put. The official telling of the story of salvation had traditionally focussed on the incarnation. God had become man in Christ – or, to put it another way, our human nature had been joined with Christ's in his life and in his death and more importantly in his resurrection. In the telling of this story, the coming of Christ into the world and his rising from the tomb and his ascending to heaven, were the key events. It was this movement, down from the heavens and up again, which mattered. God descended that we might ascend. Triumph was the essence of the story – the suffering need not be denied, but is a sideshow. But an Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm by name, told a new story (in *Cur Deus Homo/Why God Became Man* of 1098), which was quickly and widely influential, and placed new and great weight on Christ's suffering. Christ had come down not simply to join our humanity to his in a cosmic journey, but to pay on our behalf the debt which our sins had incurred. On the cross, so Anselm asserted, Christ took on what we owed and paid the bill on our behalf. It was this transaction which was crucial – it was his pain and suffering which provided the consideration, as the lawyers might have said, in return for the cancelling of our sins. Now in telling this story, we can't have a Christ essentially untouched by his suffering – on the contrary, the reality and nature of Christ's suffering needs to be stressed.

Alongside the theological change there was a devotional shift too. Separately, and itself probably an influence on Anselm, monastic devotion to Christ had begun to take an interest in his suffering – for itself, so to say. But from wherever this interest derived, the result is that Christ’s suffering ceased to be a mere happenstance of his becoming man. It became the very crux of it all – the pivot around which the whole story turned. The suffering was the core of his existence, its very point and purpose. He was born to suffer, and rose because he suffered. The result? As one scholar puts it: ‘if during the early Middle Ages, the Crucifixion was a minor detail in God’s human biography, during the later Middle Ages the entire life became a prologue to the Crucifixion’. Christ’s suffering became the heart and core of his existence – not just a detail at the end. And it would now be examined and looked at from every angle, approached from each and every viewpoint, held up to inspection to reveal every shade and nuance. What had been an incident in Christ’s life, noticed but not really scrutinised, will now be unpacked and then re-presented moment by moment, blow by blow. We pass from the crucifixion as a single event, so to speak, to its articulation and elaboration, in the stations of the cross, for example – a highly realised, carefully articulated, patiently enunciated, intensely considered, concentrated meditation on the short journey from judgment hall to death, in which every moment and modality of suffering is the subject of focussed attention.

This picture we have before us emerges from this tradition – and illustrates its sophistication by realising in vivid form one particular element of Christ’s suffering. I’ve mentioned it already. The focus is not on Christ’s physical suffering; instead Christ is shown in the midst of the especially bitter experience of suffering alone, with none of the compassion – the sympathy and fellow feeling – which itself does something to console and comfort us in our suffering. What we are asked to witness in this picture, so I think, is a man deserted by friends, surrounded by harsh foes, observed by indifferent bystanders.

There is something else however – of equal or greater importance about this picture and about the tradition to which it belongs. This something more is not something you can see for yourselves by just looking at it, but is only revealed by something I haven’t mentioned yet: its location. The picture hangs in the sacristy of the Cathedral in Toledo – it has been moved, but this vast canvas used to hang in the vestry over the head of the priest as he vested to celebrate the Eucharist. Now what this placing of the picture meant of course – and it was painted for this precise and specific location – is that between Christ and the priest a sort of exchange was to take place. As Christ is about to take off his robe, so the priest is about to put one on – and it is no coincidence that Christ’s robe looks somewhat like a chasuble, the brightly coloured vestment worn by the celebrant of the mass. As Christ is divested of his robe, so the priest vests himself in a robe which recalls it – and in passiontide as we call it, the robe would be deep red in colour in memory of Christ’s passion, as is the robe worn by Christ in our picture.

This imagined exchange, which the priest undertakes time and again, is meant to pose the question how do we take up or take on Christ's suffering? But this, of course, is the question which the whole tradition of engagement with Christ's suffering posed. The intense attention to Christ's suffering was always meant to ask us how we take up or take on this suffering which we are required to contemplate regularly, intently and focussedly?

Let me share one thought about the invitation to take up and take on Christ's suffering which this picture makes, and makes along with the whole tradition of reflection on Christ's passion.

Those who have wondered about the origins of morality, certainly from the eighteenth century onwards, have speculated that its ground and base lies in a certain natural sympathy – which, the nineteenth century added, evolution rewards. Were there no such sympathy, social groups would hardly be social groups, and would be denied the competitive advantage which, so the speculation goes, sympathy and morality provide.

Grant that it is so. Say that there is a certain natural propensity to sympathy, and that it lies at the base of sociality and morality. It doesn't follow, for one moment, that any such natural propensity will be shaped and moved and mobilised as effectively or as powerfully in each and every cultural space or time. There may be a natural propensity to art, but not every time and place will produce a Michelangelo. There may be a natural propensity to music – but not all cultures will bring forth Trinity College Choir. It matters then, what we do with any supposed inclination to sympathy – it matters how, culturally, we nurture, shape, sustain and marshal such a propensity, even supposing the original disposition to be one which all humans share.

With that thought in mind, we should surely wonder whether the detailed and disciplined attention to Christ's suffering (which is commended to us especially in Lent), and stands at the root of a vast cultural outpouring of paintings, prayers, music, poetry and so on, is an important element in the creation of a modern consciousness and within that of the sympathetic gaze. In the last thousand years, Christians have been mandated to take the time to look at, to observe, to remark upon and to abide with, one who suffers – and this has surely played a crucial role in schooling us in sympathy and solidarity. So the question becomes whether our rather different contemporary acquaintance with suffering – typically through fleeting images dashing across our TV and computer screens, or just about catching our eye as we turn the pages of newspapers and magazines – the question becomes whether this casual attention to the media's promiscuous media horror show has the capacity and power to create and sustain our sympathies towards those who suffer – or whether we are left as mere voyeurs.

One highly influential cultural commentator of the late 20th century, Susan Sontag, asserts that: 'Photographs are a means of making "real" (or "more real") matters that the privileged and the . . . safe might prefer to ignore'. But do they? Others speculate that the globalization of images of suffering 'commodify, thin out and distort experience . . . fostering moral fatigue, exhaustion of empathy, and political despair'. Which one of these claims is right?

A sermon is not the place to settle that question, but perhaps simply to leave us with the question which this conflict of opinions brings into focus and renders rather pressing. A contemporary social anthropologist has written a powerful text about what he terms 'zones of social abandonment' – those places where the poor, the destitute, the mentally ill, criminals and others, are abandoned by society to dwell in a social no-man's land, which is closer to death than it is to life; those places where many many millions have cause to voice Job's lament: 'Let the day perish wherein I was born.' Do the fleeting images which scud across of our TV screens disturb our consciousness, touch our indifference, and move us powerfully towards those many who dwell in 'zones of social abandonment'? Perhaps we will learn what suffering means and why it matters, only if our minds are not turned towards it in the more sustained and disciplined way that we are enjoined to practice in Lent. Maybe we cannot do without the practice of intensely picturing and imagining the suffering of one human being – for perhaps it was in learning to see the suffering of Christ that we were equipped to see it in others. Was it in this practice that we learnt a sympathetic and compassionate gaze? One thing is sure. It is a gaze which has lost none of its point or purpose – and will not do so unless and until zones of social abandonment, such as el Greco pictured, are themselves abolished.