

# Re-visioning the Good Friday Liturgy

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Frank Henderson's Page on Liturgy and Medieval Women

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Critical studies of the Good Friday liturgy (listed below) raise a number of questions, concerns and issues regarding this important liturgy. Here I note additional concerns regarding this liturgy and suggest some possible revisions. More obviously needs to be done.

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

Critical Reflections on the Passion Narrative of the Good Friday Liturgy  
Critical Reflections on the Reproaches of the Good Friday Liturgy  
Critical Reflections on the Good Friday Liturgy: Anti-Judaism, Paschal Character,  
Relationship to Passion Sunday, Soteriology, Christology,  
and the Preeminence of John  
Veneration of the Cross (Good Friday): Alternative Models

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

## **Outline of the Good Friday Liturgy**

For the sake of clarity, an outline of this liturgy is provided. Its official title is “The Celebration of the Lord’s Passion.”

Opening Prayer

Liturgy of the Word

First Reading: Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 31:2, 6, 12-13, 15-16, 17, 25

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

Verse: Philippians 2:8-9

Gospel: John 18:1–18:42

General Intercessions or Solemn Prayers

For the church; For the pope; For the clergy and laity of the church; For those preparing for baptism; For the unity of Christians; For the Jewish people; For those who do not believe in Christ; For those who do not believe in God; For all in public office; For those in special need

Veneration of the Cross

(With various musical texts, including the Reproaches.)

Holy Communion  
Prayer after communion  
Prayer over the people

## **Full Participation**

The central principle of the contemporary liturgical renewal, according to Vatican Council II, is that full, conscious and active participation is the right and responsibility of all; this is based on their baptism (Constitution on the Liturgy, n. 14). In addition, liturgical celebrations ought to be fruitful in the lives of those who participate (Constitution on the Liturgy, n. 11).

The Good Friday liturgy provides less opportunity for such full participation than does the regular Sunday eucharist. It remains quite traditional in shape and expression, and therefore is relatively clerical. Among other things, there is little singing by the assembly (only during the psalm, gospel verse, and veneration of the cross). At the parish level, many attempts have been made to increase participation – some more successfully than others – but these have not received official endorsement.

Participation, of course, is not entertainment, and it is not a matter of “giving people something to do.” But fostering full participation is not an option, either.

Liturgical participation has an ecclesiological dimension in that it demonstrates that the liturgy is an action of the church, and that the church is the entire liturgical assembly, not just the clergy. It also allows the assembly and its individual members to enter into the liturgical action more deeply and completely and allows the people/church to express themselves liturgically more fully.

Certainly silence and looking are legitimate modes of liturgical participation, and these are prominent in the Good Friday liturgy. Musical participation, however, is minimal, though today this has in general become a particularly significant form of lay participation.

Music for the Good Friday liturgy needs to be chosen with great care, whether simply the “other suitable songs” for the veneration of the cross, or additional songs suggested here. The mood of such songs needs to be consistent with the overall mood of the liturgy: not gloomy, but nonetheless solemn. They should not contain anti-Jewish content, they should be paschal, and the soteriology they express should be appropriate. Some songs traditionally used during Holy Week and on Good Friday unfortunately do not meet these criteria.

## **Gathering**

At present the Good Friday liturgy begins in silence, with the presbyter entering in silence and kneeling or prostrating himself in silent prayer. He then rises and begins the opening prayer. The people pray silently after the invitation, “Let us pray” (if they are given time to do so); their first verbal participation is the “Amen” at the end of the opening prayer.

An addition that would give expression to the role of the entire assembly as subject of the liturgical action would be to have an opening song. This could be solemn and restrained, in keeping with the overall mood of the Good Friday liturgy, and it could be more a meditative experience rather than a processional song.

## **Opening Prayer**

The present two texts for the opening prayer are criticized for being inadequately paschal in character and for enunciating solely an anselmian soteriology. In addition, the petition is either weak (“make us holy and watch over us always”) or somewhat unclear in meaning: (“help us to put on the likeness of our Lord in heaven.”) Finally, this prayer might use a stronger and more appropriate image of God in its address (compared to the present “Lord”). Of course it would also avoid anti-Judaism and use inclusive language.

One concrete alternative is simply to use the present prayer after communion as opening prayer, though this text too could be improved.

. . . you have restored us to life  
by the triumphant death and resurrection of Christ.  
Continue this healing work within us.  
May we who participate in this mystery  
never cease to serve you ..

New texts also need to be composed.

## **First Reading**

The present first reading is Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12, the Fourth Servant Song. Questions have been raised regarding this text from the perspectives of anti-Judaism and of soteriology.

One approach to the selection of alternative texts for the first reading is as follows. Jesus, in his suffering, death and resurrection, stands in a long line of faithful Jews who have suffered but have also been rescued or vindicated by God. This approach honors the Jewishness of Jesus; it also accepts the biblical texts first of all, as Israel's stories, which are also those of the Jewish Jesus.

This approach does not consider the first reading in a typological sense (though that mode of interpretation might be thrust upon it by some). It attempts rather to respect the character and integrity of the Hebrew Scriptures, and to see continuity (rather than discontinuity) between Jesus and his forebears. The following are examples of texts that might be used in this way.

Genesis 21:8-19. Hagar and her son are sent into the desert, and God comes to their aid.

Genesis 22:1-15. Abraham and Isaac go to present a burnt offering, and God comes to their aid.

Genesis 37:2-35. Joseph is left to die, but is rescued.

Jeremiah 37:1-22; 38:1-16 (or portions thereof). Jeremiah is imprisoned, but released.

Daniel 13 (Susanna). Susanna is unjustly accused and almost executed, but God comes to her aid.

A second approach is to let the first reading interpret the johannine passion narrative to highlight a message that is already implicit there and which is developed more explicitly elsewhere in John's gospel. This is the theme of re-birth and becoming children of God. Jesus' death on the cross is seen as death in childbirth, giving birth to the church and to God's children in the Spirit.

Appropriate first readings might include the following:

Genesis 35:9-20. Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin.

1 Samuel 4:1-22. The wife of Phineas dies in childbirth and the ark of God is captured.

These stories are respected for their own sake, but they also guide participants' interpretation of the passion narrative.

Both approaches are also ways of bringing women's stories to the Good Friday liturgy.

## Psalm

The present text uses selections from Psalm 31, and could be kept. An alternative, chosen for the Revised Common Lectionary, is Psalm 22. Another alternative would be Isaiah 38:9-30, the song of Hezekiah.

## Second Reading

The present second reading is Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9. Questions have been raised regarding this text from the perspectives of anti-Judaism, soteriology, and regarding its paschal character. In addition, it might be better to use a coherent passage rather than several snippets.

One alternative is to follow the Revised Common Lectionary in using Hebrews 10:16-25.

A second alternative, which would effectively express the paschal character of this liturgy, is to use the same reading that is used at the Easter Vigil, namely:

Romans 6:3-11. Baptized in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

A third alternative is to use other passages that explicitly link death and resurrection (and use diverse soteriological images as well). The following are possible readings:

Romans 8:18-39 (or 31-39). Christ died, was raised, and makes intercession for us

1 Corinthians 15:3-28 (or 20-28). Christ was raised from the dead. . . the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

2 Corinthians 5:14-21. [Christ] died and was raised. . . new creation / reconciliation / ambassadors / righteousness

2 Peter 3:18-22. Christ was put to death, but was made alive in the Spirit.  
[This is now used for Lent 2B.]

## Gospel

A separate critical study of the johannine passion narrative, listed at the bottom of the title page, above, considered serious questions that have been raised with respect to its apparent anti-Jewish bias. The same study also considered a number of possible approaches and remedies.

Four ways of shortening the johannine passion narrative were proposed, and they are repeated here.

**Version 1:** Accusations of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus are removed; this mainly concerns the account of the trial before Pilate. (In 18:28–19:16, some smoothing out may also need to be done where verses are omitted. The liturgical reading would therefore include the following:

Arrest of Jesus (John 18:1-12)  
Denial by Peter (John 18:15-20)  
Appearance before Annas (John 18:19-24)  
Denial by Peter (John 18:25-27 )  
Crucifixion and burial (John 19:16a-40)

**Version 2:** The appearance before Annas and the trial before Pilate are omitted. The liturgical reading would have the following shape and content.

Arrest of Jesus (John 18:1-12)  
Denial by Peter (John 18:15-20; 18:25-27)  
Crucifixion and burial (John 19:16b-40)

**Version 3:** Here the prayer of Jesus in chapter 17 of John is added because it includes important statements regarding the meaning of his death and resurrection. In addition, the arrest of Jesus and denial by Peter are viewed as having been transferred to the first Sunday of Lent. Finally, as above, the appearance before Annas and the trial before Pilate are omitted. The liturgical reading would have the following shape and content.

Priestly prayer of Christ (John 17:1-26 or portions)  
Crucifixion and burial (John 19:16b-40)

**Version 4.** Here the liturgical reading would include only the account of Jesus' crucifixion and burial, as follows:

Crucifixion and burial (John 19:16b-40 or 19:17-30)

In other studies listed above it has also been suggested that the synoptic passion narratives no longer be used on Passion Sunday. Instead, all four passion narratives would be proclaimed on Good Friday in a four-year cycle. The synoptic texts would also be shortened along the lines suggested here for the johannine text.

## **Homily and Song**

The passion narrative is followed by the homily. This in turn might be followed by a song sung by the entire assembly. This would have a meditative and reflective character and provide a transition between two major parts of the Good Friday liturgy.

## **Solemn Prayers / General Intercessions**

The present official title in English is General Intercessions, translating the Latin *Oratio universalis*. For reasons stated more fully below, I believe that Solemn Prayers is a better title.

At present there are ten prayers, for: the church, the pope, the clergy and laity of the church, those preparing for baptism, the unity of Christians, the Jewish people, those who do not believe in Christ, those who do not believe in God, all in public office, and those in special need.

They begin with an invitation-introduction, which is considerably expanded beyond the usual “Let us pray.” There is then a pause for silent prayer, and the body of the collect follows. The people respond, “Amen.” The main spoken parts are said by the presbyter alone, or by a deacon (invitation) and presbyter (body). Questions arise regarding full participation, and regarding the paschal character and soteriology of these prayers.

## **Participation**

Gabe Huck voices the following concerns regarding the General Intercessions of the Good Friday liturgy.

These are most likely to be known to those attending the liturgy as “those long, long prayers.” ... The reaction that the prayers are too long is partly to the prayers themselves (which are rather repetitious in praying for the church) but is more often to the style in which they are done. Too often it seems that there is a rush: the presider and deacon can’t wait to get through. A tone of voice, a posture, speed, lack of expression, all these – especially the hurrying – are exactly what makes the prayers seem so long. And this: they come immediately after the homily which comes immediately after the passion. If neither

of these was terribly engrossing, then it's asking a lot of these prayers to seem anything but long. (Three Days, p. 36)

The prayers are extensive in number (ten) and the text of each is relatively long. They are also in the less familiar collect style rather than the more common litanic form. As collects, each prayer has a relatively lengthy introduction or invitation in addition to the text of the prayer itself. The people participate mainly through silent prayer following the invitation. In practice the period of silent prayer may not be given much time by the presider, it may get shorter as the prayers proceed, and the people may or may not know what to do with the time for silent prayer provided them. All respond "Amen" at the end of the each prayer.

A further issue is that these prayers (except for the "Amen") are spoken entirely by deacon and presbyter or by presbyter alone. This contrasts with the more common practice today of having the presbyter invite the prayers, a lay person present the intentions in litanic form, with a concluding brief collect by the presider. Preparing and leading such prayers is, in many places, a significant area of lay participation. The clericalization seen on Good Friday is a reflection of older practice and ecclesiology, and should not be retained today.

Alternatives that might improve this part of the Good Friday liturgy with respect to full participation include reducing the number of prayers (for example, Lutheran Book of Worship contains nine, and the Book of Common Prayer/Book of Alternative Services have only five; the latter are longer than the Roman Catholic prayers, however.)

A second suggestion is that the invitation / introduction be shortened. It would really be an invitation, then, and not a second prayer. For example, compare the following existing text and a shortened version:

*(Present text)*

Let us pray for those preparing for baptism  
that God in his mercy  
make them responsive to his love,  
forgive their sins through the waters of new birth,  
and give them life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

*(Suggested alternative)*

Let us pray for those preparing for baptism.

(However, expanded invitations can lead to creative texts that are not constrained by the collect form. In the Anglican/Episcopal liturgies, for example, the invitations are in some cases considerably longer than the body of the collect.)

A third suggestion is that lay people participate in the leadership of these prayers, at the very least in announcing the invitations.

A fourth possibility is to use a litanic form of prayer rather than the collect form. The people respond more frequently, and often at greater length, in litanies than in collects.

## **Soteriology and Paschal Character**

The solemn prayers also need to be considered from the perspective of paschal character and soteriology. Why are they -- or should they be -- distinctive in the Good Friday liturgy, and what exactly is their role and significance in this liturgy?

For the last four centuries the Good Friday prayers were distinctive because general intercessions were not included in the regular Sunday eucharistic liturgy. Before that, the solemn Latin prayers of Good Friday differed in form -- and partly in content -- from the vernacular general intercessions. Today, however, general intercessions are in common use and the Good Friday prayers are less distinctive (though still unique in some respects).

Gabe Huck hints at a direction that might be taken with respect to soteriology and role in the Good Friday liturgy.

We join with Jesus crucified to intercede with the Father for ourselves, our brothers and sisters, our world. The prayers themselves capture something very basic to redemption, to reconciliation, in their all-embracing memory and concern. (Three Days, p. 36)

The problem is that this is not done very well. These prayers need to be seen as a continuation of Jesus' own ministry. They need to reveal God's love for all humankind and all creation, and Jesus' solidarity with and commitment to all of God's creation. In this light, "intercession" seems an inadequate term, and may also carry unhelpful baggage of some soteriological theories of the past. "Solemn Prayers of Love and Solidarity" might be a better full title. Each prayer should include a phrase such as "through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. . ."

The solemn prayers would express a more paschal character if they were explicitly related to the meaning of Christ's life, death and resurrection. Further, it should be clear that they set forth a characteristic and expectation of the baptismal life, for individuals and for the entire church: it is the responsibility of baptized persons to carry on Jesus' ministry of love and solidarity and of prayer for all. Thus they need to be as participatory as possible and be experienced as the prayer of the entire church and all the baptized.

The Solemn Prayers of Love and Solidarity might begin with a prayer for all of God's creation. They then would become more focused in two ways:

They would consider the world from a religious perspective: traditionally those who do

not believe in God, those who do not believe in Jesus Christ, the Jewish People, Christians and the church.

They would consider the needs of society and individuals: traditionally public officials and those with special needs.

Thus the minimum number of prayer is three, though seven would not be unreasonable. For example the Anglican/Episcopal liturgical books have five prayers: all nations and peoples; all who suffer; all who have not received the gospel; a general prayer. Regarding order, it seems reasonable to move from the more general (all creation) to the more specific (the church); putting the church last might also express a certain humility and indicate that the church is for the sake of all.

## **Veneration of the Cross**

At present the cross is first shown to the assembly, and then venerated. In the first mode of showing the cross, a veiled cross is carried to the altar and then unveiled in three stages. In the second mode the unveiled cross is carried in procession through the church. In the first mode of veneration all process to the front and individually venerate the cross. In the second the priest “invites the people to venerate the cross and the holds it up briefly for them to worship in silence.”

Full participation is heightened if the people process and individually venerate the cross. In large assemblies, where this may not be done, this part of the liturgy can become rather static. The music that is sung during the veneration is another important mode of participation, so long as it is done by the assembly and not just by a choir.

Questions have been raised regarding anti-Judaism (if the reproaches are used), about paschal character and about soteriology. Suggestions for improvement have already been made with respect to the reproaches.

The veneration of the cross is an opportunity (in addition to the solemn prayers) for the worshiping community and its individual members to respond to the word proclaimed in the three readings. It is also an opportunity to express in action and song the meaning of Christ’s death (and resurrection). Finally it is an opportunity to appropriate the significance of Christ’s death for oneself and the Christian community.

The veneration of the cross can take on diverse meanings, depending on how it is done, what texts -- especially songs -- that are used to accompany the veneration, and what implicit and explicit soteriologies are brought to it by the members of the assembly. Thus it can focus (a) on Jesus’ sufferings or on triumph over death; (b) on God as stern judge or God as lover of

humanity and all creation; (c) on Jewish responsibility or Christianity responsibility -- or ignore the question the responsibility; (d) on sorrow and grief or joy and thanksgiving.

Several alternatives to present texts and practices may be envisioned.

1. Texts portraying Jesus speaking to us from the cross may be composed. These need not speak of guilt and blame, but rather of God's love and our response of discipleship.
2. Other alternatives may be envisioned; see for example the separate document: Veneration of the Cross (Good Friday): Alternative Models.
3. A variety of unofficial and undocumented practices have been or are being used in individual parishes. Over time information about these might be gathered, evaluated and shared.

## **Communion**

Many today question the desirability of including communion from reserved hosts in the Good Friday liturgy, and I share this view. This liturgy is not a eucharistic liturgy and it seems inconsistent and inappropriate to have communion outside the eucharist. This is not the practice of other churches, and its theological purpose is unclear. A eucharistic fast on Good Friday and Holy Saturday does not seem inappropriate.

Discontinuation of communion on Good Friday would mean that the reservation of consecrated hosts at the Holy Thursday evening liturgy would be strictly for the sick and dying. The Holy Thursday liturgy might therefore be simplified in this regard.

## **Other Services**

Gabe Huck (*Three Days*, pp 45 ff) Reminds us that other liturgies do or may take place on Good Friday, and that the relationship of these to the principal Good Friday liturgy needs to be considered. He names the following:

Stations of the Cross  
Ecumenical Services  
Children's Liturgy  
Liturgy of the Hours

In addition, the vigil-keeping that follows the Holy Thursday liturgy might inspire similar

vigils following the Good Friday liturgy, either as a continuation of the main service or as a separate service (or more than one separate services). Such a vigil service might include readings, song, silent prayer, dance, etc. Three themes offer themselves as possibilities:

Mary and John, based on John 19:25-27.

The Women who Keep Watch, based on Matthew 27:55-56, 61; Mark 15:40-41, 47; and Luke 23:55-56.

Joseph (and Nicodemus) take the body of Jesus down from the cross and give it burial, based on Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-56; and John 19:38-42.

It may be noted that in some medieval parishes, a liturgical drama was performed on Good Friday that was inspired by these biblical themes, especially the second. It was paired with a liturgical drama on Easter Sunday having to do with the women who went to the tomb.

Reference: "Off the Weping of the Thre Maries," Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms 160, early 16<sup>th</sup> century. See Thomas Wright and James Orchard Halliwell, eds., *Reliquiae Antiquae*. London: Willian Pickering, 1843; Reprint AMS Press 1966, vol. 2, pp. 125-143.

The second model veneration of the cross (*see* Veneration of the Cross/Good Friday: Alternative Services) might also be used in such a vigil service.