

Critical Reflections on the Passion Narrative of the Good Friday Liturgy

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

- 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, the Preeminence of John
- Re-visioning the Good Friday Liturgy
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Introduction

A prominent element of the Good Friday liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church (and other churches) is the reading of the passion narrative from John's gospel (chapters 18 and 19). This gospel passage is a central element of this liturgy, it is lengthy, and it sometimes employs several readers or is heightened by dramatization. Some understand the johannine passion narrative to be anti-Jewish because it appears to claim that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus.

Vatican Council II's document, *Nostra Aetate*, states "Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ, neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion. It is true that the Church is the new people of God, yet the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture. (n. 4)

Following the Council, and especially during the 1970s and 1980s, a great deal of study and writing on perceived anti-Jewish elements in Christian liturgy and theology in general, as well as concerning the language of John's gospel. Several writers made concrete proposals to revise the Good Friday liturgy in order to reduce its perceived anti-Jewish content and tone. (References to this literature may be found in articles by Eugene Fisher and by Piet van Boxel and Margaret McGrath.) More recently, less attention appears to have been given to this matter. However, Joanne Pierce has considered anti-Jewish elements in the medieval Catholic liturgy, and John Mellow has outlined the changes made following Vatican Council II; Lawrence Frizzell and I have surveyed the question of "Jews and Judaism in the Medieval Latin liturgy." In any case, no changes in the Good Friday liturgy have been made. The present series of studies is intended, in part, to keep this conversation going.

Of course, I do not believe that the church today consciously intends its holy week and Easter triduum liturgies to be anti-Jewish. However I also appreciate that some parts of these liturgies can be so understood, and feel that the church should do a better job of preventing such misunderstandings from arising. As well, I know that our present liturgy, however, reformed, has roots in a historical milieu that was definitely anti-Jewish.

Anti-Jewish Aspects of the Passion Narrative

Four scholarly assessments regarding anti-Judaism in John's passion narrative (and other parts of this gospel) are presented here. Raymond Brown and Donald Senior are scripture scholars, Gabe Huck is a liturgist, and John Pawlikowski is an ethicist who also specializes in Christian-Jewish relations. Similar assessments have been published by others as well, e.g., Sandra Schneiders, pp 34-35, 45, 75-76, 82-83, and William Herzog, pp 218-246, especially 245.

Before quoting these authors, however, I also present relevant sections of the 1985 “Guidelines” published by the U.S. Catholic bishops:

The presentation of the crucifixion story should be made in such a way as not to implicate all Jews of Jesus’ time or of today in a collective guilt for the crime. (no. 10b)

Further analysis of the use and implications for today of such expressions as “the jews” by St. John and other New Testament references that appear to place all Jews in a negative light is also called for. (These expressions and references should be fully and precisely clarified in accordance with the intent of the conciliar statement and subsequent teachings that Jews are not to be “presented as rejected or accursed by God as if this followed from Holy Scripture.” (Section 10g).

Raymond E. Brown

One cannot disguise a hostility towards ‘the Jews’ in the Johannine passion narrative, neither by softening the translation to “Judeans” or “Judaists,” nor by explaining that John often speaks of “the Jews” when the context implies that the authorities (i.e., the chief priests) alone were involved. By deliberately speaking of “the Jews” the fourth evangelist is spreading to the Synagogue of his own time the blame that an earlier tradition placed on the authorities. He is not the first to do this . . . but John is the most insistent New Testament writer in this usage.

Brown, “The Passion. . . ,” p. 130

Donald Senior

John’s tendency to make the opposition to Jesus symbolic of evil itself has important consequences for interpreting this Gospel. The tendency to abstraction also works to merge the opponents of Jesus into a single category: ‘The Jews.’ . . . but distinctive of John is the labeling of Jesus’ opponents as ‘Jews,’ a labeling . . . that has had some terrible consequences in subsequent Christian interpretation of the Gospel.

By tending to merge the various groups of Jewish opponents to Jesus into one group, ‘the Jews,’ and by casting them as symbols of unbelief and aggressive hostility to Jesus, John’s Gospel - perhaps more than any other - has unwittingly fueled Christian anti-semitism.

John’s portrayal of Jesus’ opponents lends itself to anti-semitism when interpreters use the Gospel as a basis for hatred or contempt for Jews. This has been a tragic and even sacrilegious legacy. A Gospel whose one message is a proclamation of love should not be used in such a way that it drips hatred and prejudice into the life blood of the Church.

Senior, *The Passion. . .* , 41, 155, 156

Gabe Huck

Unfortunately, there is a great problem in John's passion narrative, and that is the anti-Jewish character not only of the language but of the whole tone and viewpoint. John's account uses the name 'Jews' without any special modifiers that would show the meaning to be not the whole people but the determined enemies of Jesus. To the listener it appears that the whole Jewish people stands against Jesus and Jesus against the people. Pilate, on the other hand, comes across as the good Roman who would willingly have saved Jesus but was forced to give in to the threats of the mob. All of this has occasioned great misunderstandings on the part of those not acquainted with the kind of writing this is and the circumstances that gave it birth. In recent years, Vatican guidelines have pointed out the danger in the use of these texts. . . .

Huck, *The Three Days*, p. 35

John Pawlikowski

A second problem associated with Good Friday is the reading of the passion narrative according to John. All the accounts of Christ's passion and death present some difficulties for Christian-Jewish relations. But the Good Friday selection from the fourth gospel is the most problematic of all. There has been considerable discussion of John's anti-Judaism in biblical and theological circles. This gospel's use of the term "the Jews", rather than specific names like Pharisees, etc., and its seeming identification of "the Jews" with the forces of utter darkness stand at the center of the controversy as to its anti-Semitic bent.

For some scholars the Jewish guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus appears greater in the Johannine passion narrative than it does, for example, in the Marcan version. Pilate is depicted as less of a culprit in John who also gives greater play to the abuse of Jesus by the "Jewish" crowds while Mark focuses on Jesus mistreatment by the Roman soldiers. These emphases some scholars take as very deliberate . . . an attempt by John to totally discredit Judaism among his Christian readers. [He then goes on to present the view of one scholar who doesn't think John is as bad as the others.]

Pawlikowski, "Transforming . . .," p 27

Conclusions

These writers raise two concerns. One is the frequently used phrase, "the Jews," which casts Judaism and all Jews in a bad light, and also seems to imply Jewish culpability for the death of Jesus.

In addition, some passages of the johannine passion narrative refer to Jewish culpability in more specific ways. These include the following. (Here and elsewhere, scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version.)

Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people. John 19:14

So Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” They answered, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.” The Jews replied, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.” (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die. 18:29-32

Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done? 18:36

After he had said this, [Pilate] went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” They shouted in reply, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a bandit. 18:38-40

Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.” So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!” When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him,” The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.” 19:4-7

From then on Pilate tried to release [Jesus], but the Jews cried out, “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.” 19:12

[Pilate] said to the Jews, “Here is your King!” They cried out, “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!” Pilate asked them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but the emperor.” Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.” 19:14-16

Proposed Courses of Action

What courses of action do these four writers suggest?

Raymond Brown:

An initial response is . . . to omit the anti-Jewish sections from the public reading of the passion narrative. In my opinion, a truer response is to continue to read the whole passion, not subjecting it to excisions that seem wise to us, but once having read it, then

to preach forcefully that such hostility between Christian and Jew cannot be continued today and is against our fundamental understanding of Christianity.

Sooner or later Christian believers must wrestle with the limitations imposed on the Scriptures by the circumstances in which they were written. They must be brought to see that some attitudes found in Scripture, however explicable in the time in which they originated, may be wrong attitudes if repeated today. They must reckon with the implications inherent in the fact that the word of God has come to us in the words of men. To excise dubious attitudes from these reading is to perpetuate the fallacy that what is heard in the Bible is always to be imitated because it is “revealed” by God, the fallacy that every position taken by an author of Scripture is inerrant.

Brown, “The Passion. . . ,” p. 131

Donald Senior

Some have suggested that the only antidote to this problem is to alter the text of John’s Gospel either by translating the term “Jews” as “Judeans,” thereby making the term less generic and more historically circumscribed, or, at least for liturgical services, to edit John’s text all together so that offensive passages are not proclaimed in Christian churches.

None of these solutions is completely satisfying and perhaps no solution based on altering the text can be. A more difficult but ultimately more substantial solution is to awaken readers, listeners and preachers of the Gospel of John to its historical circumstances and to the full meaning of its theology, thereby enabling Christian proclamation to attack anti-Semitism, not feed it.

Senior, *The Passion. . . ,* p. 157

Gabe Huck

In recent years, Vatican guidelines have pointed out the danger in the use of these texts and have encouraged homilists to be certain that the meaning behind the words is clear. Obviously, that approach is quite limited if the homily is to be more than a lesson about John’s time and theology.

One thing is clear. If the long passion is read, the homilist must study the things [Raymond] Brown is discussing and, as much as possible in the context of a true homily, bring these to people’s attention.

Some scripture scholars have suggested that the passion reading for this day be limited to a very few verses concerning only the crucifixion itself, the death of Jesus and his burial. This would be the historical core and all that is needed for the purposes of good liturgy on this day.

Indeed, this would allow for a greater emphasis on the reading from Isaiah (and perhaps for use of other readings from the servant songs) which is probably more helpful in contemplating the passion and death of Jesus than is the difficult scenario presented by John's gospel.

Huck, *The Three Days*, pp. 35, 36

John Pawlikowski

The challenge before the churches, especially those which use John in their Good Friday liturgies, has been squarely put. We need to expose our congregations to the kind of nuancing of the trial and death of Jesus uncovered by John's Townsend's analysis as well as sensitize them to the fact that an authentic Christianity today cannot proclaim in faith the anti-Jewish teachings in the fourth gospel that resulted from church-synagogue tensions in ancient times. Such re-education admittedly will prove to be a trying ministry, but one from which moral responsibility will not allow us to shrink given the suffering and persecution of Jews by Christians which had their origin in these teachings.

Pawlikowski, "Transforming. . .," p. 28

Reflections on Proposed Courses of Action

These writers, taken together, recommend four courses of action. The first three, on which all but Gabe Huck place exclusive weight, are education, preaching, and what I shall term "critical discernment" of the scriptures; the fourth is altering the text of the liturgical reading.

Certainly I too favor education, good preaching and critical discernment of the scriptures. These need to be promoted and carried out on an on-going basis. Yet they require clear definition, serious commitment, and unflagging persistence.

Education

Education regarding anti-Judaism in general, in relation to scripture, and in relationship to the liturgy needs to be done and done well. Yet it should be recognized that much is being asked of teachers, learners and of various educational systems. This needs to be included in school-based religious education, from elementary school through to university and seminary. Catechetical programs for children and youth, adult religious education programs, and the rite of Christian initiation of adults all need to be considered and included as well.

In content, such education needs to cover several areas:

1. The death of Jesus. Comparative studies of all four passion narratives, and knowledge of Roman and Jewish legal systems of the day, lead at least some scholars to the conclusion that the Romans bore ultimate legal responsibility, and that only certain Jewish officials were antagonistic to Jesus and brought him before the Roman authorities. Others distinguish between a “real” legal trial and a “show trial” carried out for non-legal purposes.

2. Relationships between Christians and Jews at the time the gospels were written, some years after Jesus’ death. The gospel writers projected conflict in this period was projected back into the lifetime of Jesus.

3. Knowledge of anti-Judaism in church and society through the last twenty centuries and its consequences for the Jewish people, including of course the Holocaust.

4. The repudiation of anti-Judaism by the church in our own times.

5. The Good Friday liturgy itself, in whole and in part.

Is such education really being carried out and in a consistent and effective manner? Even if it is, it presents and sets up a complex series of intellectual filters through which one is supposed to appreciate the passion narrative of the Good Friday liturgy as life-giving religious message. Does such education help or hinder the passion narrative as a liturgical and spiritual experience - rather than a difficult history lesson? And if this education is lacking or incomplete - as I imagine is not uncommonly the case, then what are the consequences?

One specific - and liturgical - form this education might be taken is through the use of brief introductions to the liturgical readings. Such an introduction for the passion narrative of Good Friday was published, for example, by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in the late 1970s. The following is its proposed text:

In the passion and death of Jesus according to St. John, which we are about to proclaim together, we announce the heart of the Christian message: God loves all men unto death, even death on a cross. The hostility between the earliest Christians and their Jewish brothers, as manifested in the gospel of John, cannot be continued today. The timeless message of reconciliation and love for all mankind has to replace early Christians’ prejudice against their Jewish contemporaries before Jesus’ work will ever truly be finished.

Are such introductions still being used, and if so, how extensively? How effective have they been?

Preaching

This is the second course of action recommended above, though it is not clear that preaching is always distinguished from education.

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles in 1977 published the following statement regarding preaching at the Good Friday liturgy.

The already challenging task of the homilist during Holy Week is to make present the redemptive nature of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. In a time-conscious and multi-media age, this is no light or easy charge. Is the already stretched homiletic seven minutes asked to bear another sensitivity, another prescribed homily topic - removing anti-Semitic images?

This would prove an ill-fated pastoral trap. We are not asked to add, nor are we asked to isolate - rather we are asked to integrate. The Passion account is highly charged. It is an account of conflict. The events of the Passion account in all the gospels are, for the most part, reflections of an interfamilial struggle. All the actors in the drama, with the exception of Pilate and other Romans, are Jews - including Jesus, his disciples and followers. This struggle is heightened with the escalation of the inter-familial tension between Jewish Christians and other Jews. We can approach the ultimate purpose of accurately presenting the mystery-reality of redemption in an integrated fashion without doing harm to the integrity of our proclamation.

How do we create such an integrated approach? We have indicated the do nots: do not add length; do not simply preach on anti-Semitism. Ignoring the Hellenistic influences, historical developments and textual difficulties we should personally place ourselves in the passion narrative; we should acknowledge our personal failure to accept the gospel message. By weaving this within our homily we invite our congregation to personalize the passion event.

The homilist is asked not to lose the overall image of the fabric of revelation - God's eternal and forgiving love for all mankind. The homilist must place that forgiving love in the historical events of Christ's passion as well as in the continued drama of the present journey of the Jew and Christian of today. The Jew and Christian of today are pilgrim people with these truths written on their hearts: God always cared for his people, continues to care and always will. Among his people, Christian and Jew, there have always been those who are faithful and trusting. Among his people, Christian and Jew, there have always been those who did not remain faithful and trusting.

Gabe Huck also notes that:

In recent times, Vatican guidelines have . . . encouraged homilists to be certain that the meaning behind the words is clear.” He adds, “Obviously, that approach is quite limited if the homily is to be more than a lesson about John’s time and theology.” He goes on to say, “One thing is clear. If the long passion is read, the homilist must study the things [Raymond] Brown is discussing and, as much as possible in the context of a true homily, bring these to people’s attention.”

The Three Days, pp. 35-36

For other remarks on preaching, see Fisher, “Suggested Guidelines...”, Sheerin, “Sensitivity to Jews...” and “God’s Mercy Endures Forever...”.

Some Catholic presbyters undoubtedly preach well on the Good Friday liturgy. But others most likely are not able to preach appropriately about Jewish-Christian relations, or are not inclined to deal with this matter. There is also much else on which to preach on Good Friday. I personally do not recall ever hearing such a homily.

Critical Discernment

Raymond Brown calls for Christian believers to “wrestle with the limitations imposed on the Scripture by the circumstances in which they were written,” to critique the bible, and to discard “dubious attitudes” that “may be wrong attitudes if repeated today.”

This is wonderful and liberating, yet also bold and challenging. Is this approach alive and well in the church today? - I doubt it. Is it encouraged and affirmed? Once we start to exercise such critical discernment, where will it lead? We know that attempts to apply such critical discernment to questions of women, homosexuality, and liberation have been opposed by some.

Changes in the Liturgical Texts and Opposition to Change

The fourth possible course of action is to change liturgical readings, prayers and songs to reduce anti-Judaism and to combat anti-Jewish attitudes.

It is clear that Raymond Brown and Donald Senior oppose this - but they really do not say why. Do they mean that liturgical change is not possible at all, or that it is not likely to occur, or that it is undesirable? They neither explain nor do they defend their positions. Others must oppose liturgical change as well. After all, after more than 30 years of study, discussion,

statements of principle and concrete suggestions for revision, the church officially has made no substantive change in the Good Friday liturgy.

Why might further changes in the liturgy not be made, especially as these would seem to be logical applications of principles already in place (see below) and the necessary consequences of statements of principle made by council, popes and bishops? In particular, factors other than the specific content of passages that would be emended, omitted or replaced might be important. Some responses to actual or proposed changes might be more affective than cognitive in nature, and perhaps more influential for that reason.

One might imagine, for example, that scripture scholars and liturgists might approach questions regarding the Johannine passion narrative somewhat differently. The scripture scholars - quite understandably - might tend to think of large units of scripture: chapters, books, types of books (e.g., gospels), etc. In addition they might tend to think of the text in its original languages and according to the best critical editions.

The liturgical experience of scripture, however, is somewhat different. Here scripture is usually read in the form of pericopes - relatively short passages. In addition, it is used in vernacular translation, and some verbal adaptations are customarily made. Thus for the sake of intelligibility, pronouns at the beginning of pericopes are often replaced by nouns, place-names may be inserted, etc. Furthermore, for centuries it has been customary to insert the address "Fratres" or its equivalent at the beginning of readings from the Pauline letters. (We need not go into the liturgical use of scriptural allusions and single verses.)

Resistance to liturgical changes might have other bases as well. For example:

Are changes in the Good Friday liturgy resisted because they are perceived as being promoted by the Jewish community - that is, "outsiders"? Might such an attitude itself be based on anti-Judaism?

Might there be fear that making such changes in the Roman Catholic liturgy would provide a precedent for still other liturgical changes, for example, through inculturation.

Are worshipers really aware of and sensitive to the anti-Jewish portions of these texts. Some may not be aware of the anti-Jewish issue; others may be aware but do not think anything about it; still others may hear and be offended; still others, unfortunately, may embrace and accept anti-Judaism.

Is the Good Friday liturgy seen as being open to growth, development and improvement, or is it seen as (near) perfect and irreformable?

Is the tradition that the entire johannine passion narrative be used in the Good Friday liturgy of such weight that no changes can be made, or is it seen as a traditional practice that, while given respect, is evaluated critically and is open to growth and development?

Changing the Text of the Passion Narrative: Principles

I take it for granted that there will be appropriate education, preaching and critical discernment. However I wish to go further and imagine changes in the liturgical readings and prayers as well. We may begin by recalling that changes have already been made in recent memory, both before and after Vatican Council II. Thus the phrase “perfidious Jews” was removed from the Good Friday liturgy even before the Council, and the liturgical reforms that followed it included new first and second readings and reduced the Reproaches to an option.

Potentially, anti-Judaism in the passion narrative might be reduced:

- through translation and emendation of the language of the passion narrative
- by selecting text - that is by omitting some of the present text
- by replacing the johannine text
- two or more of these courses of action might be combined.

Principles regarding translation of liturgical texts in general, and regarding the selection of biblical texts for use in the lectionary, have been enunciated by the Roman Catholic Church in other contexts. These principles seem helpful in considering possible revision of the text of John’s passion narrative and they will be summarized here.

Translation and Emendation

For many years following Vatican Council II, the translation of liturgical texts was guided by principles enunciated in a document called “Instruction *Comme le prevoit*. On the Translation of Liturgical Texts.” Among other things, this document states that:

The translator must always keep in mind that the “unit of meaning” is not the individual word but the whole passage. 12c

The purpose of liturgical translations is to proclaim the message of salvation to believers and to express the prayer of the Church to the Lord. . . . To achieve this end, it is not sufficient that a liturgical translation merely reproduce the expressions and ideas of the original text. Rather it must faithfully communicate to a given people, and in their own language, that which the Church by means of this given text originally intended to communicate to another people in another time. A faithful translation, therefore, cannot be judged on the basis of individual words: the total context of this specific act of communication must be kept in mind. . . . 6

Both statements indicate that translation need not be a literal, word by word, process. In addition, the second statement refers to the goal of liturgical readings and prayers, “to proclaim the message of salvation.” Surely these principles encourage consideration of the possible emendation of John’s passion narrative. Thus one of the common suggestions regarding this text is that the phrase “the Jews” could be re-translated or emended to read “the Judeans,” “the people,” “they” or something similar. Likewise, “the chief priests” might be changed to “religious leaders” or “the religious authorities.”

Unfortunately, church officials have recently rejected *Comme le prevoit* and have moved instead toward narrow, word-by-word translations.

Selection of Text

The very essence of a liturgical lectionary is that it is a selection - a choice - of biblical texts, not the entire bible. Certain portions of the bible are selected for inclusion; others are omitted. In addition, the biblical readings are proclaimed and heard in the liturgical assembly, not in a classroom, library or study.

This applies to the passion narratives as well as to other texts. For example, the biblical passion narrative of Matthew’s gospel begins with 26:1; yet the Roman lectionary now omits 26:1-10 and begins with verse 11. In the biblical text the passion narrative in John begins with the arrest of Jesus in the garden; Matthew and Mark begin with the anointing of Jesus by the woman, followed by the Last Supper; Luke begins with the Last Supper. Thus even the gospel writers do not share a uniform view of what constitutes “the passion narrative” - which in any case is the terminology of a later age.

The present Roman Catholic lectionary is a result of the use of several types of selection. The principles governing these are set forth in the “Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass” (second edition, 1981). Applicable quotations are provided here.

Reservation to some books on the basis of liturgical seasons.

74 Another tradition . . . is the reading of the Gospel of John in the latter weeks of Lent and in the Easter season.

Length of texts.

75. A *via media* is followed in regard to the length of texts. A distinction has been made between narratives, which require reading a fairly long passage but which usually hold the people’s attention, and texts that should not be lengthy because of the profundity of their teaching.

In the case of certain rather long texts, longer and shorter versions are provided to suit different situations. The editing of the shorter version has been carried out with great caution.

Difficult texts.

76. In readings for Sundays and solemnities, texts that present real difficulties are avoided for pastoral reasons. The difficulties may be objective, in that the texts themselves raise complex literary, critical, or exegetical problems; or, at least to a certain extent, the difficulties may lie in the faithful's ability to understand the texts. But there could be no justification for depriving the faithful of the spiritual riches of certain texts on the grounds of difficulty if its source is the inadequacy either of the religious education that every Christian should have or of the biblical formation that every pastor should have.

Omission of Texts

77. The omission of verses in readings from Scripture has at times been the practice in many liturgical traditions, including the Roman. Admittedly such omission may not be made lightly, for fear of distorting the meaning of the text or the intent and style of Scripture. Yet on pastoral grounds it was decided to continue the tradition in the present Order of Readings, but at the same time to ensure that the essential meaning of the text remained intact. One reason for the decision is that otherwise some texts would have been unduly long. It would also have been necessary to omit completely certain readings of high spiritual value for the faithful because those readings include some verse that is unsuitable pastorally or that involves truly difficult problems.

Options in the Choice of Some Texts

78. . . . Options [when they are provided] . . . have a pastoral aim. In planning the liturgy of the word, then, the priest should consider "the general spiritual good of the assembly rather than his personal outlook. He should be mindful that the choice of texts is to be made in consultation with the ministers and others who have a function in the celebration and should listen to the faithful in regard to the parts that more directly belong to them" [quote from GIRM 313].

Long and Short Forms of Texts

80. A pastoral criterion must also guide the choice between the longer and shorter forms of a text. The main consideration must be the capacity of the hearers to listen profitably either to the longer or to the shorter reading; or to listen to a more complete text that will be explained through the homily.

The basic principle given for selecting or adapting the text of a scripture reading for liturgical use is described as “pastoral” need (“pastoral reasons,” “pastoral grounds,” “pastoral aim,” “pastoral criterion”). Is not anti-Judaism a pastoral need? These already established principles therefore seem appropriate guides as one considers the readings of the Good Friday liturgy.

Possible Changes in the Text of the Passion Narrative

The principles outlined above may now be applied to the johannine passion narrative. I can imagine several alternative versions of the passion narrative that would be less anti-Jewish than the present text.

Translation / Emendation

In Canada the Roman Catholic lectionary is based on the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, with further emendations by a Canadian editorial committee. In eight places in the passion narrative according to John, the phrase “the Jews” of the NRSV has been replaced by an alternative expression, namely:

Jewish leaders (4 times)	18:14; 18:38; 19:12; 19:14
they (2 times)	18:31; 19:7
Jewish authorities (once)	18:36
the people (once)	19:20

In the United States the lectionary is based on the New American Bible. The phrase “the Jews” has not been emended in this lectionary.

I take it for granted that this type of emendation will be employed, either alone or - preferably - in conjunction with other possible changes considered below.

Selection

Four possible ways of “selecting” text from the johannine passion narrative for use in the Good Friday liturgy are presented here. All four involve omission of certain passages; one also involves addition of material.

(It may be noted that short versions of the synoptic passion narratives are offered in the lectionary for Passion (Palm) Sunday, but not for the johannine text used on Good Friday.)

Minimum change: Accusations of Jewish responsibility are removed. The verses listed above that have to do with Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus are deleted. (In 18:28 - 19:16, some smoothing out may also need to be done where verses are omitted.) Thus the liturgical reading would have the following shape and content.

Arrest
 18:1-12
 Appearance before Annas (a)
 18:13 OMIT 18:14
 Denial by Peter (a)
 18:15-20
 Appearance before Annas (b)
 18:19-24
 Denial by Peter (b)
 18:25-27
 Trial before Pilate
 18:28 OMIT 18:29-32
 18:33-34 OMIT 18:35
 18:36-38a OMIT 18:38b-40
 19:1-3 OMIT 19:4-7
 19:8-11 OMIT 19:12
 19:13-14 OMIT 19:15
 19:16a
 Crucifixion and Burial
 19:16b-40

Moderate change: The appearance before Annas and the trial before Pilate are omitted. The liturgical reading would have the following shape and content.

Arrest
 18:1-12
 Appearance before Anna (a)
 OMIT 18:13-14
 Denial by Peter (a)
 18:15-20
 Appearance before Annas (b)
 OMIT 18:19-24
 Denial by Peter (b)
 18:25-27
 Trial by Pilate
 OMIT 18:28 - 19:16a
 Crucifixion and Burial
 19:16b-40

Omissions plus Addition: Crucifixion and Burial plus Prayer of Jesus. The prayer of Jesus in chapter 17 of John is added because it includes important statements regarding the meaning of the death and resurrection. The Sunday lectionary assigns this chapter to Easter 7 in three

portions for years A, B, and C. (A = 17:1-11a; B = 11b-19; C = 17:20-16). In Canada this chapter is never read because it is replaced by the readings for the Ascension. The liturgical reading would have the following shape and content.

The proposed transfer of certain passages to Lent 1 BC is part of a projected re-visioning of the liturgies of the Sundays of Lent, still in progress.

Priestly prayer of Christ
17:1-26 (or portions thereof)
Arrest
TRANSFER 18:1-12 to Lent 1B
Appearance before Annas (a)
OMIT 18:13-14
Denial by Peter (a)
TRANSFER 18:15-20 to Lent 1C
Appearance before Annas (b)
OMIT 18:19-24
Denial by Peter (b)
TRANSFER 18:25-27 to Lent 1C
Trial before Pilate
OMIT 28:18 - 19:16a
Crucifixion and Burial
19:16b-40

Maximum Change: Crucifixion and Burial only. The proposed transfer of passages to Lent 1 BC is part of a projected re-visioning of the liturgies of the Sundays of Lent, still in progress. The liturgical reading would have the following shape and content.

Arrest
TRANSFER 18:1-12 to Lent 1B
Appearance before Annas (a)
OMIT 18:13-14
Denial by Peter (a)
TRANSFER 18:15-20 to Lent 1C
Appearance before Annas (b)
OMIT 18:19-24
Denial by Peter (b)
TRANSFER 18:25-27 to Lent 1C
Trial before Pilate
OMIT 18:28 - 19:16a
Crucifixion and Burial
19:16b-40

Other. It may be noted that Anglican and United Methodist resources suggest John 19:17-30 (crucifixion only) as a short version of the Good Friday gospel reading. (Book of Alternative Services 1985, p 309; The New Handbook of the Christian Year, 1992, p. 181)

Replacement of Text

Another possible course of action is to replace the johannine passion narrative with another version of this story.

Paraphrase. In 1977 John T. Townsend published *A Liturgical Interpretation of Our Lord's Passion in Narrative Form*. It is based on Matthew and Mark rather than John, and emends some of the language so that "crowd" and "demonstrators" and the like are used in place of the "the Jews." In addition, it deletes problematic passages such as Matthew 27:24-25:

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"

Synoptic passion narratives. A second approach would be to use the passion narratives from Matthew, Mark and Luke in turn with John, in a four year rotation. It would still be desirable to emend and select these texts, along the lines already proposed. This is considered further below.

Possible Consequences of Changing the Text of the Passion Narrative

Because some oppose - or would oppose - such changes in the present use of the johannine passion narrative in the Good Friday liturgy, it is appropriate to try to indicate some of the pros and cons of such a course of action.

What might be gained by any or all of these possible changes in the text of the passion narrative for the Good Friday liturgy? What might be lost?

Decreased Anti-Judaism

A positive consequence of the types of changes in the johannine passion narrative suggested here is that the Good Friday liturgy would be rendered less anti-Jewish. Christians who

celebrate this liturgy would be less likely to be prejudiced toward Jews and would be more likely to be critical of how Christians have treated Jews during the last twenty centuries. Relations between Catholics and Jews hopefully would be improved.

Making such changes would also show how seriously the church regards anti-Judaism and would demonstrate that it is willing and able to give concrete expression to the general principles that it has made regarding this issue.

Altered View of Jewish Responsibility for the Death of Jesus

It might be objected that the types of changes suggested here fail accurately to report Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. (Gerard Sloyan's *The Crucifixion of Jesus* is helpful on this and related matters.) However, the gospel writers wrote as theologians, not as historians in the modern sense of the term. In addition, such changes help to distinguish between the story of the death of Jesus and the story of relations between the Johannine community of Christians and the Jewish community with which it was in contact at a later period. The context of the Good Friday liturgy, with its apparent focus on the death of Jesus, may make it difficult to deal with the influences of later Christian-Jewish tensions and conflict.

It may be added that the actual role of this or that individual Jew or this or that group of Jews, vis-a-vis the death of Jesus is simply not known to us, at least with any degree of historical accuracy. Finally, tensions between Jesus and some Jews are related in all four gospels, and such passages are heard by worshipers at various times through the year.

Sloyan (p. 75) points out that "there are three strains in New Testament thought: one exclusively theological in which Jesus' condemnation and the circumstances of his death do not figure; another that has retained bits of reminiscence regarding his last days; and a third - represented by the Gospels and Acts - where Jewish responsibility is featured, if not exclusively." Thus dwelling on responsibility for Jesus' death cannot be said to be necessary feature of biblical tradition or absolutely incumbent on us today.

In the course of Christian history, the view that "the Jews" were responsible for the death of Jesus might be said to have served a psychological-sociological function, in that it provided Christians with a clear enemy, villain, scapegoat - a "them" for our "us." This is not authentic Christianity and it would be good to get rid of it.

So far as the issue of responsibility is concerned, focusing on Jewish responsibility also serves to diminish the (theological) responsibility of Christians for the death of Jesus. In addition, at a theological level, Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus has led to (or at least contributed to) the view that Jews and Judaism are inferior to Christians and Christianity, and to the view that Judaism has been completely replaced by Christianity. Again, it would be good to grow beyond these views, though it remains a challenge for theologians and the entire church to develop and articulate alternative theological views of Christian self-identity.

Christological Issues

If the appearance before Annas and the trial before Pilate are removed, some passages of Christological significance are deleted:

[Appearance before Annas(b)]

18:19 Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. 20 Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret.

21 Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said,"

22 When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?"

23 Jesus answered, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong, But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?"

[Trial before Pilate]

18:33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

34 Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

35 Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me, what have you done?"

36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

37 Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that 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."

39 Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?

19:3 They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

19:9 [Pilate] entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer.

10 Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?"

11 Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above...."

14 Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!"

These passages refer to Jesus as king and show that he is in control of his destiny. However, the same themes are also expressed in the story of the crucifixion and burial (19:16b-40), retained in all of the suggestions for change made here.

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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Catholic Daily Reflections on the Gospel of the day. For personal devotion, prayer and meditation. Prepare for Mass or simply enrich your faith each day. January 10, 2020 Friday after Epiphany Readings for Today It happened that there was a man full of leprosy in one of the towns where Jesus was; [Read more>>>](#). The Prophetic Role of Christ. Our reflections will interrogate reasons for both the popularity of the film and why it has evoked such intense controversy. The Caviezel Jesus is virilely good-looking, buff and athletic, and very macho, representing Mel Gibson's ideal of masculinity as well as his version of Jesus. Revealingly, most of the main characters are clearly white and Western, which is not an accurate portrayal of race and ethnicity of the biblical peoples of the period. Indeed, The Passion presents a pornography of violence with savage beatings, brutality, and torture as extreme as any in S&M porn films. The narrative also contains suppressed homoeroticism, fetishism of body parts from the reverently portrayed foot washing to obscenely violent flaying and scourging of flesh.