

Good Friday Tenebrae 2025: "My Jesus, Good Night!"
April 18, 2025
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Some artwork is too much. I appreciate realism, but not gore. The painting "Christ Carrying the Cross," probably by a student of Hieronymous Bosch, early 16th c. Dutch artist, makes me want to **back up** if not **look away**, not because it's bloody, but because the throng of people hemming in and jostling a gentle, battered, bone-weary Christ dragging His cross are so weird. One book describes it like this: "Known for his representations of deformed, monstrous figures, the Dutch painter Hieronymous Bosch (1450-1516) emphasized the maniacal cruelty of Jesus' tormentors."¹ Leering men with bulbous or hook noses, sallow skin, protruding eyes, jutting jaws, stubbly beards, nearly toothless grins, huddled together as if they're plotting; a man in a dunce cap, eavesdropping on them; mean-looking soldiers with cavernous cheeks, and another with a pork-pie face framed by a too-tight helmet. There's one normal-looking woman in the bottom left foreground, holding a cloth on which we see a partial image of Christ's face. It reminds us of Veronica's veil, the non-Scriptural story of a compassionate, courageous woman who impulsively used her veil to wipe the blood-streaked face of the suffering Savior as He walked the Via Dolorosa, the Sorrowful Way, toward Calvary, and later discovered the imprint of His face on it.

The name Veronica literally means "true image," referring to the Lord's likeness on the cloth. But unfortunately we could also say that the ugly, cartoon-like characters in Bosch's painting would be a "true image" of **us**, if our sins were visible on our faces. Truth be told, if the sins on our souls, the ugliness of our spirits, were translated into flesh and blood, we would look no more glamorous or attractive than the "deformed, monstrous figures" of "Jesus' tormentors" in that painting. We can't really imagine ourselves shouting "Crucify!" before Pilate in his headquarters, or excitedly gathering up family and friends to witness what St. Luke calls "the

spectacle” on Calvary. But our sad spirits and turned stomachs over what transpired in the last hours of our Lord’s life don’t erase the fact that He died because of **our** sins and for the salvation **we** could never merit for ourselves.

In Bach’s beautiful *Passion According to St. Matthew*, a soloist sings the following words after Pilate condemns Jesus to death, washes his hands of the matter, then orders Jesus whipped and led out to crucifixion:

God, have mercy!
Here stands the Saviour bound,
O what scourges, O what blows, O what wounds!
Stop, torturers!²

Those are words we wish **someone** had spoken on behalf of our Lord Jesus, as He faced false conviction and execution. But none of the Gospels record such words. The time is past for us to speak those words on our Lord’s direct behalf, but we can still pray, “God, have mercy!” and use our voices to defend and support those who are falsely accused in our own day. We can still cry “Stop!” to those who torment the innocent and crush the vulnerable. Undeniably our Lord’s Passion continues today in the suffering of His beloved.

Hafiz was a Persian poet who lived about a hundred years before Columbus voyaged to the New World. He wrote a poem about the shining beauty and power of Love that pours itself out without expectation of thanks.

Even after all this time
The sun never says to the earth,
“You owe me.”
Look what happens with
A love like that.
It lights the whole sky.

I’d change it up just a little bit:

Even after all this time
[Jesus] never says to [us],

“You owe me.”
 Look what happens with
 A love like that.
 It lights the whole [world].

He loves us despite our moral deformity and our monstrous track record of regularly choosing self over God and neighbor. He loves us despite our cruelties, be they casual, unthinking or calculated. He loves us despite our tormenting of the planet and of the stranger. He inexplicably but wholeheartedly loves us: [pointing to crucified Christ, and outstretching arms like His] loves us “this much.”

Near the end of the *Passion According to St. Matthew*, a soprano sings to the now entombed Lord:

Take from us, as long as life lasts,
 Infinite thanks for Thy suffering,
 Which for the welfare of my soul,
 Thou hast endured.

The Chorus responds:

My Jesus, good night!³

Amen.

¹*The Story of Jesus* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1993), p. 279).

²60. Recitative – Alto.

³Ibid. Conclusion. 77.

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