

The aim of these four Holy Week meditations, which I have called 'Music of the Passion' is to give enough background on four relatively short pieces of music that throw some light on aspects of the suffering of Jesus, so that they can help us to enter into those experiences. They are not meant to be teachings, let alone fully worked-out theology, but they are intended to give all hearers space in which to try and comprehend what Jesus took on himself for our sakes.

Tonight's piece is a Responsory written for a now defunct liturgical observance known as *Tenebrae*. From at least the Middle Ages until the reform of the Holy Week liturgy in the 1950s, the services we now hold on the evenings of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday took place in the morning, and the Offices of Matins and Lauds – the Church's Morning Prayer – were pushed back to just before dusk the evening before, and celebrated together in one liturgical lump called *Tenebrae* – the Latin for 'darkness', and the first word of one of the principal antiphons used in the service – it was getting dark when they crucified Jesus.

Tenebrae was a long service, containing the three sections of Matins, each with three Psalms and three readings each with their own Responsories, and all this followed by Lauds, with its own five Psalms and four Canticles – fourteen Psalms in all! There was a special candle stand with fifteen candles (called a hearse), and after the end of each Psalm one of the candles was put out, so that by the end of the fourteenth Psalm one candle was left, which was not put out but hidden away so it could cast no further light on proceedings. Then came the *strepitus* (Latin for 'great noise') which was supposed to be a reminder of the earthquake at the crucifixion, but like most very significant liturgical events, probably originated with the need to wake everyone up after such a very long

service. At the very end, the remaining candle was brought back out from its hiding place and put out in front of the gathered congregation.

The music we are going to hear this evening is the responsory for after the fifth reading for Holy Saturday, which would have actually taken place in the evening of the day before – Good Friday. It is set to music by Victoria, a Spaniard who was a contemporary with Tallis and Byrd, but whose music contains an emotional charge which in my view is not found in any major church composers in England until Henry Purcell. Victoria learned his trade in Rome at the German College in Rome, and at the Roman Seminary, and in Rome he was ordained a priest in 1574 by Thomas Goldwell, the last Roman Catholic Bishop of Saint Asaph, and the longest-surviving of the bishops consecrated under Mary Tudor.

The words are very simple:

O vos omnes, qui transitis per viam – Hey – all of you who are passing by on the road

Attendite et videte: si est dolor similis sicut dolor meus – pay attention, and see if there is any pain like my pain

Attendite, universi populi, et videte dolorem meum – pay attention, peoples of the world, and see my pain

Si est dolor similis sicut dolor meus – if there is any pain like my pain.

Victoria draws our attention with relatively simple harmonies (sing), but when it comes to demanding our attention (sing), the urgency of the demand is reflected in the rising pitch and rising tension in the harmony. Then the pain is clearly felt in the falling cadence (sing), and the onlookers' helplessness in the face of that pain in the resolution (sing).

Most translations would use the word 'sorrow' for *dolor*, but I think it is far more stark and realistic to call it what the word really means – pain, both physical, mental and spiritual.

The singers we are going to hear are the Tallis Scholars, and when I go down from the pulpit in a moment I will first read the words slowly again, and then play the music. You may wish to choose some part of the church to focus on while this is happening, or look at the Rood Cross, or simply close your eyes and contemplate a mental image or nothing at all while considering the intensity of the music and the intensity of what Jesus was prepared to go through for our sake. I will then conclude with the prayer used at the end of the traditional *Tenebrae*.

Responsory read again slowly in Latin and English

Music played

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzYBAuNt4JQ>

Look down, O Lord, on this family of yours, for which Jesus our Christ did not hesitate to give himself into the hands of those who wished him harm, and to undergo the torture of the cross. Amen.

PC, 24th March 2024