

### On the First Letter of Peter (3)

*Brothers and sisters: it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*

1 Peter 2.19-end

We can hear, as before, the voice of the Prophet Isaiah in these words of the Apostle Peter, as he describes the *healing* quality of the wounds of Jesus Christ. That is, they are wounds which are suffered on our behalf, that we may obtain their benefit:



*Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Isaiah 53.4-6

In these words is the beginning of a theology of *atonement* – of the means by which we are ‘reconciled to God’, or brought back into God’s embrace. It is why the language of *sacrifice* permeates Christian terminology, although it is always moderated by another theme in the Hebrew Bible, that the sacrifice truly pleasing to God is our own worship of God and performance of the works of justice and goodness:

*O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.*

*For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt-offering you would not be pleased.  
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Psalm 51.15-17*

While we should be mindful of the *wounds*, the real emphasis is on the *healing*. In this sense these texts from the Prophet Isaiah reflect the whole of what the Church came to interpret as the *Paschal Mystery* – the ‘Passover’ by which we are saved – in which the events of *Good Friday* and those of *Easter Day* are inseparable; they are part of the *same thing*, which is the reorientation of all possibility away from death and despondency and instead to hope and renewal and life. The same *process of conversion* is expressed in the form of confession in the old Prayer Book:

*Almighty and most merciful Father,  
we have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.  
We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.  
We have offended against thy holy laws.  
We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;  
and we have done those things which we ought not to have done;  
and there is no health in us.  
But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders.  
Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults.  
Restore thou them that are penitent;  
according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord.  
And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake,  
that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory  
of thy holy name. Amen.*

The whole meaning of the *Pascha* – Jesus’ self-offering for us in his death and resurrection – is to break the cycle of violence and allow us a new start. For all the imagery of sheep and lambs, there is something *defiant* about how he does this: it is the work of a resilient fortitude and moral strength in the face of the world’s own powers of violence and wickedness and corruption and suffering. Jesus doesn’t flinch. It is why the Apostle John sees the *cross* as a sign of *glory* – the moment when darkness is *held to account*, and God’s work is completed, made perfect (cf John 19.30). May that completion and perfection take root in us too. Alleluia.

*The mosaic of the Lamb of God is in Santa Maria in Trastevere in Rome*