

The Solemn Reproaches of the Cross

The debate about anti-Semitism in the Good Friday liturgy with special reference to the Reproaches by Louis Weil

The Reverend Louis Weil is Hodges-Haynes Professor of Liturgics at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California. He is author of *A Theology of Worship*, vol. 12 of The Church's New Teaching Series (Cowley Publications, 2001), *Liturgy for Living* (Morehouse, 2nd revised edition, 2000) and numerous articles. Father Weil earned academic degrees at Southern Methodist University, Harvard University, The General Theological Seminary and Institut Catholique de Paris. Father Weil is a good friend and popular preacher and celebrant at the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin.

In 1976, the Draft Proposed Book of Common Prayer for the Episcopal Church was published. This book included for the first time since the Reformation a full set of ritual texts for the Triduum Sacrum. Actually, however, for over two decades some Episcopal parishes had been celebrating these rites using resources drawn from the restored rites for Holy Week authorized by Pope Pius XII. There had developed a general recognition among Episcopalians that there existed an urgent pastoral need for the recovery of these rites.

By the time that work on a new prayer book reaches the draft proposed stage, the ritual texts are all but officially set and simply await a second approval at the following General Convention three years later. But in this case, in the draft version of 1976, among the rites for Holy Week, there was a set of texts for Good Friday which would be eliminated from the final version: the texts in question were those known as The Reproaches. The Reproaches (or in Latin, the Improperia) included texts which had developed between the 7th. and 11th. centuries for use on Good Friday in connection with the Veneration of the Cross.

Immediately after the Draft Proposed Book was issued, a heated debate broke out concerning the purported anti-semitism of the Reproaches.

In the Episcopal Church, the person most actively involved in demanding the removal of these texts from the anticipated 1979 Book of Common Prayer was the Reverend John Townsend, a member of the faculty of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA.

I decided to call Professor Townsend and inform him of my confusion over his protest. He called the texts a parody of the Dayenu recited by Jews at the Passover Seder, which he saw as insulting to the Jewish people and an obstacle in Jewish-Christian dialogue. I told Professor Townsend that I had been a member of an Episcopal parish which had celebrated the restored rites of the Triduum for several years, including the singing of the Reproaches, and that it had never occurred to me that the texts were addressed to the Jews. I had always heard them as words addressed to the Christian people, indicating that we, like the Jews, fail to live up in our daily lives to the great acts and promises of God. I also told him that since I had been raised in a Jewish family, I would certainly have been sensitive to any indication of anti-Semitism.

Professor Townsend was not to be convinced, and his strong stand eventually led to the removal of the texts from the final authorized version of the Prayer Book in 1979. In spite of this, the texts have continued to be a part of the Good Friday Liturgy in many Episcopal parishes.

This issue has continued to interest me, and it remains a much debated issue in those traditions in which these texts might find a place in the rite for Good Friday. The culprit normally aimed at in this debate is an early Christian bishop, Melito of Sardes [120 – 185 CE] whose Homily on the Pascha is seen as a violent

attack on the Jews and as the source of texts which later were incorporated into the Reproaches. The Jewish scholar Eric Werner wrote an article on Melito in 1966 which contributed greatly to the debate. In that article, Werner referred to Melito as "the first poet of deicide."¹ That article had influenced Professor Townsend.

More recent scholarship has contributed some additional data. Another Jewish scholar, Dr. Michael Brocke, wrote an article some ten years later which made important corrections to Werner's thesis.² Brocke draws attention to the important fact that the Dayenu are not reproaches to the Jewish people, but rather a thanksgiving celebration of the great things which God has done for them. In the Dayenu as item after item of God's graciousness to his people is named, the people respond "It would have been enough."

Brock contends that it is from within the Jewish community that a parody (if it may be so called) of the Dayenu appeared. Using a similar structure, the texts become ones of reproach: again naming the wonderful works of God, the response becomes, "O my people, what more could I have done for you?" Brocke suggests that Bishop Melito was not writing a parody, but rather drawing upon a form which had developed among Jews in the celebration of the Passover and which was known to Bishop Melito and that he incorporated into his homily.

This is not to let Melito completely off the hook. The fact is that his Homily on the Pascha is clearly anti-Semitic in tone and probably contributed to the flourishing of anti-Semitism in later centuries. But my question is rather regarding the Reproaches and their appropriate or inappropriate use in Christian worship on Good Friday. Some writers have commented that the text is so problematic that it would be better simply to exclude it from the rite. Others, including myself, believe that the text has great power, and rightly understood deserves to be maintained at least as an option in the Good Friday rite. This is the solution in the Roman Rite. Clearly our liturgical catechesis must make it clear, if there is any doubt, that the accusations voiced in the Reproaches are directed against the Church: in them, Christ is asking us "what more could I have done?" It is our lack of faith that is under accusation.

Something more than catechesis is, however, required. Many writers have suggested that verses be added to the traditional text, verses which would be specifically addressed to the Church. When I first worked on this question back in the early 1970s, I added a verse from the Passion hymn *Herzliebster Jesus* ('Ah, holy Jesus')

Who was the guilty?

Who brought this upon thee?

Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.

T'was I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee:

I crucified thee.³

The Methodists published an adapted version of the Reproaches in 1979, which clearly addresses the Church in the latter sections.⁴ This version was adopted by the Anglican Church of Canada in 1985. Other proposals have come from other sources.

In conclusion I want to dare to add another piece to this discussion. Last year at Passover I was invited to celebrate with friends at Congregation Beth-El here in Berkeley. As we moved through the ritual, I turned a

page and realized that we had arrived at the Dayenu. Immediately, of course, the issue of the Reproaches came into my mind. It occurred to me to ask, why should we look at these texts as divisive? Why can we not look upon them, as is true of other elements in the Judeo-Christian liturgical tradition, as part of a common ritual language? That these texts remind us, whether we be Jewish or Christian, that God's grace and generosity to us reaches beyond anything we deserve. And that all of us, whether Jewish or Christian need to hear the reproach: "What more could I have done? Now turn to me again in faith." Surely this is a common ground upon which we can stand together.

Copyright © 2005 Louis Weil
lweil@cdsp.edu

¹Eric Werner: "Melito of Sardes, the First Poet of Deicide," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. 37 (1966), 191-210.

²Michael D. Brocke: "On the Jewish Origin of the Improperia", *Immanuel* (Spring 1977), 44-51.

³Hymn 159, *The Hymnal* 1982, NYC: Church Hymnal Corporation.

⁴From *Ashes to Fire*, Supplemental Worship Resource 8. Nashville: Abingdon, 1979.