

## **The Emotional Wounds of Christ**

*English translation of a transcript of a sermon delivered in Arabic by*

**Deacon Adel Azer Bestavros**

*On the Eve of Good Friday, 1981 at St Mina Church, Fleming, Alexandria, Egypt*

---

### **Why should we contemplate Christ's Passion?**

Encouraging the believers to persist in fighting sin and in “*enduring the race that is set before us*”, St Paul the Apostle asks us to contemplate the Passion of Christ “*the author and finisher of our faith ... For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.*” In a gentle reproach of our weakness, he goes on adding that we “*have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin*” [Hebrews 12:1-4].

Tonight is a holy night that the Church has consecrated to contemplate, reflect and indeed share in the sufferings and passion of The Lord even if very little, even if for a single night.

Christ talks to us tonight, just as He talked to Simon Peter on that night at Gethsemane—for Simon and all the other disciples had sleepy eyes and heavy hearts from sadness and “*fell asleep*”, only to be awakened by Christ who wanted to share His Passion with them, asking “*Simon, couldn't you just stay up with me for one hour?*”

Tonight is a night we stay up to share and reflect on the passion of Christ, even if for a single hour.

### **Suffering is the key to Christianity, for Christ is perfected in his suffering.**

It is through His sufferings and passion that Christ is perfect: “*Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.*” [Luke 13:32] He said this prophesizing with regards to the passion He was about to endure in Jerusalem. St Paul emphasizes this by characterizing Christ's passion as the fullness of Christ, noting that “*it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell ... having made peace through the blood of His cross*” [Colossians 1:19-20].

My beloved in Christ: suffering is the key to Christianity. Without believing in the suffering and passion of Christ, there is no way we would know Christ, nor would it be possible to understand Christianity. Today, Christians in general, and the Copts of Egypt in particular, are constantly asked: Why all this gore? Why all this pain? Why did Christ have to suffer?

Sadly, these questions are not only posed by non Christians, but unfortunately, they have become the subject of their ridicule. This is why we as Christians must be prepared and ready to answer these questions – and in the process reveal the secret of our faith and hope.

The Jewish crowds walked with Christ up to the gates of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, for the Gospel says: “*Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD! Hosanna in the highest!*” [Matthew 21:9] But, these waves of crowds quickly dissipated when they saw His passion unfold.

When presented with His suffering and passion, the Jewish people (as with many unbelievers today) were not able to accept Christ. They accepted Him as a healer who performs miracles, and who feeds crowds of thousands with five loaves of bread. But, whenever He spoke of His upcoming passion, they rejected Him.

St Paul explains that “*Christ crucified is to the Jews a stumbling block*” [1 Corinthians 1:23-24]. One can expect that reaction from the Jewish people who wanted “*a sign*” of glory and power that identifies their long-awaited Messiah “*the Son of David ... who comes in the name of the Lord!*” To them, the cross was not a sign but rather a stumbling block.

To intellectuals and philosophers, exemplified at the time of Jesus by the Greeks and in our world today by atheists, the cross makes absolutely no sense, and those who take pride in Christ’s passion are fools, as St Paul exclaims “*Christ crucified is to the Greeks foolishness.*”

To all those who want to accept Christ only as a great teacher and prophet, like Muslims and others, the crucifix does not make any sense; they just want to forget about it, perhaps by just pretending it “really never happened” and that the whole passion was a figment of their imagination – a fantasy “made up by his disciples and followers.”

My beloved, this is exactly why many people walk with Jesus up to the beginning of His Passion, up to the gates of Jerusalem, and just leave him there.

My beloved, a Jesus who is stripped of His Passion – even if honored and revered by the world and by non Christians – is not our Christ. For we join St Paul in proclaiming that “*Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God.*” It is in the crucifix that the power of Christ was revealed, for in His weakness, He has revealed what is greater than strength. Indeed, as He explains to St Paul: “*My strength is made perfect in weakness.*” [Corinthians-2 12:9] And, it is in the crucifix that the wisdom of God that was veiled for thousands of years was revealed in Christ Jesus.

Without the passion of Christ, there would be no salvation for humanity. Our Christian faith as professed by the early fathers and carried to us on a “*cloud of witnesses*”, and as recited in the core of our creed by children and elders alike, states that “*Christ was crucified for us during the reign of Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried. He arose from the dead on the third day, according to the Scriptures.*”

Christ is the “incarnate” Son of God, the “suffering” Son of God, and the “crucified” Son of God. In truth, He became man and suffered to death on the cross. This is not a matter of “imagination” or “illusions” as many who want to honor Christ want us to believe! Those who find it incomprehensible that Christ would face such suffering and death have not tasted nor have they experienced the depths of His love to humanity. If they did, they would embrace the cross and believe in the crucified to the end of time!

St Athanasius, the author of our creed, explains this very clearly in his treatise “*On the Incarnation of the Word*”. St Athanasius explains that humans, who are God’s creation, fell to the devil. He then asks if it is conceivable for God to accept to see His creation perish. Could God simply turn His back and leave mankind – which He created after His own image – to be defeated by the devil? This is not conceivable! This is why St Athanasius insists that it was necessary for God to intervene to save His fallen creation, for it was inconceivable for God to accept to see sin prevail. Would a father stay still seeing his son or daughter fall sick and risk

dying from a disease? Wouldn't he intervene and do everything in his capacity to seek a cure? As Christ Jesus explains *"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give to those who ask Him!"* [Luke 11:13]. If we, with all our weaknesses and shortcomings, do not hesitate to sacrifice our life for our children, how dare we question God's willingness or capacity to save His children whom He created in His image?

As Christians, we must walk with Christ through the gates of Jerusalem and all the way to the feet of the cross. Like John the Evangelist, we must sit with Christ at the table, resting our heads on His bosom, and we must stand next to His cross to witness His ultimate sacrifice on our behalf. For it is John's faithfulness to Christ that got him to be the first to witness Christ's resurrection – John being the first to enter the empty tomb on Easter Sunday! Indeed, if we are to witness Christ's glory in the resurrection, we must first witness His suffering and passion.

### **The importance of walking with Christ through His Passion, suffering, and death**

Why is it important for us to reflect in Christ's suffering? It is because contemplating in Christ's suffering helps us deal with the pain and suffering we experience in our own lives. As St Paul emphasizes, we should remember His pain so that we would not give up when we are faced with our own suffering and temptations. This is why we must walk with Christ and get a taste of His suffering, even if our experience is extremely diluted.

My beloved, St Paul warns that all those who want to follow Jesus will be prosecuted. But even then, our suffering and our prosecution are yet to reach the level that our fathers had to endure, as St Paul said for we *"have not yet resisted to bloodshed"* [Hebrews 12:1-4].

We should not shy away from our cross, for as St John Chrysostom says: *"I cry for those who shy away from the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ"*.

### **The two types of sufferings of Christ: His Bodily and Emotional Wounds**

Prophet Isaiah – often described as the fifth evangelist due to his almost complete prophecies of the birth, life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ – describes the suffering Christ as *"a man of sorrows"* who was *"acquainted with grief"* and who *"was wounded for our transgressions"* [Isaiah 53:3-5]. Here, Isaiah differentiates between the two sources of Christ's sorrow: His physical sufferings inflicted by the wounds to His body, as well as the sufferings and grief that He had to withstand emotionally.

Christ was full in his humanity. As such He experienced both bodily pain and emotional pain.

When we contemplate Christ's passion, we often focus on His bodily wounds – the smiting of His holy body, the bruises on His shoulders from carrying the cross, the crown of thorns on His holy head, the piercing of His holy hands, feet, and chest, *etc.* These are the wounds captured by artists in paintings and emphasized by artists in movies. These are the wounds reflected in the shroud of Turin and the ones that Thomas wanted to check!

Every time I contemplate Christ's passion, I recall my pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1965. During Holy Week, and as we were walking with scores of pilgrims down the narrow alleys of Jerusalem, following the various stations of the cross, we came across a church that stands where The Lord was smitten. Until this day, and from the days of the Romans, still etched on the grounds there are marks from the horseshoes of the horses used by the Roman guards, as well as

markings from various games they played on the grounds around the Church, and in one spot, a sign in Roman read *“on this spot, the Roman guards cast a lot on Christ’s robe”*. Inside that church, in a dark corner I came across a statue made out of white marble of Christ lying on the ground after being smitten. The injuries on Christ’s body were marked with red coloring on the white marble – a beautiful, very expressive statue that is left in a dark corner, away from where the crowds typically congregate. This prompted me to ask my guide: “why don’t you display this statue more prominently in the middle of the church?” He answered: *“Well, let me tell you... This statue was originally in the middle of the church. But when thousands of pilgrims walk through the church during Holy Week, hundreds of them would fall down in tears just from looking at the statue.”* He added, *“We had no choice but to remove it from the middle of everything”*. My beloved, if this is our reaction to an artist’s rendition on a piece of marble of the pain of suffering of Jesus Christ, how would our reaction be if we witnessed it for real! Indeed, it is as if we were reading a Gospel etched in the stones.

But, what about the invisible wounds that Christ had to sustain? What about Christ’s grief and His emotional pain and suffering? My beloved, one cannot truly appreciate Christ’s passion without contemplating His emotional grief and sorrow.

Tonight we reflect on Christ’s emotional grief and sorrow.

As the Gospel tells us, as soon as Christ set His sight on the cross at Gethsemane, He increasingly felt sorrowful, saying *“My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death”* [Matthew 26:38]. So what is the nature of that sorrow that inflicted Christ’s soul? We can see at least five such types of sorrows – each of which would pain the whole world, and all of which were bourn by Christ without *“opening His mouth”* as prophesized by Isaiah who exclaims: *“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His Mouth”* [Isaiah 53:7].

## **Feeling hated**

The first emotional wound that afflicted Christ’s soul and indeed His heart is His feeling of being hated by those whom He loved. Indeed, in speaking to His disciples on the eve of His Passion, He said: *“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you”* [John 15:18]. He also warns them that *“you will be hated by all for My name’s sake”* [Luke 21:17]. Speaking to the Jews he asks: *“Why do you seek to kill Me?”* [John 7:19].

It is very difficult for a loving heart to find the reflection of its love to be hate. To understand this we should ask who are these people who hate Jesus back then (the Jews) as well as today (the World)? Well, John the Evangelist gives us the answers: *“He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him”* [John 1:11]. And why did He come in the first place? It is because *“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”* [John 3:16].

Christ loved His own people (the Jews) as well as His whole creation (the whole world). He loved them not for anything they did – for they were a people with a lot not to like! Indeed, John the Evangelist condemns them saying *“the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil”* [John 3:19]. Jesus Himself spoke of their evil ways for they *“pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith”*, for they *“strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”*, and for they *“cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of*

*extortion and self-indulgence*” [Matthew 23:23-25]. Later in that passage, Christ asks: *“Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?”* [Matthew 23:33] Interestingly, it is Jesus Himself who provides them with the only way to escape condemnation – Himself!

But despite their evil works, Christ still loved them. Indeed, it is because of human sin that Christ came in the first place: *“For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance”* [Matthew 9:13].

Christ loved them for no reason, and they hated Him for no reason! How painful could this contradiction be?

So, what is Christ’s answer to this grief, to this unexplainable mistreatment? As He enters Jerusalem, the city that will kill Him, knowing quite well the utter destruction that was going to hit it 40 years later, He cried, saying: *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”* [Matthew 23:37]. Not only that, but after His resurrection, He instructed His disciples that *“repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem”* [Luke 24:47].

Often times, we Christians find ourselves going through a similar experience. Often times, a Christian finds himself or herself spreading goodness to all, but in return for this act of love, he or she is faced with acts of utter hate. This was an experience of Christ. My beloved, blessed are you if you go through a similar experience because you have shared in Christ’s passion, as you have partaken from one type of pain He had to endure. And, as He forgave those who crucified Him, you too should follow his example.

My beloved, these days being a witness for the name of Christ subjects us to deadly hate. This is not new. Indeed, the Gospel tells us of the reaction of the world to Lazarus – a silent witness for the work of Christ, who brought Lazarus back to life after having being buried for three days. Lazarus’ mere existence irritated the enemies of Christianity to the point that they wanted to kill not only Jesus, but Lazarus as well as the Gospel says: *But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death; because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus.*” [John 12:10-11].

My beloved, don’t be afraid if Christ’s enemies conspire to kill you as they have conspired to kill Lazarus. We should not be afraid because, as the Gospel tells us, it was not Lazarus who died, but Christ. They conspired to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. But, it was Christ’s death that ended the conspiracy against Lazarus. Similarly, in any conspiracy against us we should know that Christ has already endured it for us – His passion is our salvation.

### **Feeling oppressed**

The second emotional wound is oppression – the feeling of being treated unfairly. Isaiah sums up Christ’s passion in one sentence: *“He was oppressed”* [Isaiah 53:7].

Twice He was wronged by the Jewish court at the Sanhedrim. He had to face false witnesses. All along, the Jewish high priests planned to kill Jesus, yet they anointed themselves as Judges!?! He had to contend with a government that is unfair in that it is unable to control the mobs, the rioters









