

Sermon. 5 December 2021. Advent 2.

Today I'd like to do something different, and mildly transgressive. I do mean *mildly* transgressive. So please moderate your expectations of fun. I'd like us to reflect on a hymn we will sing. (You see why I say mildly transgressive? It can be done. But if it happened week in, week out, with no reflections on the readings, more would be lost than would be gained.)

The hymn is the great Advent anthem, *Lo He Comes*. Perhaps some of you are mentally singing it. It is Charles Wesley at its finest. Great melody. It might also be said to be Advent at its purest. I mean it is entirely about the Second Coming of Jesus at the end of time. There is not even a passing reference to Christmas. Surely, then, there's a strong case for filling Advent with *Lo He Comes*.

And yet.

And yet. Let's look at the second verse. These are the original words:

*Every eye shall now behold him
Robed in dreadful majesty;
Those who set at nought and sold him
Pierced and nailed him to the tree,
Deeply wailing (deeply wailing, deeply wailing)
Shall the true Messiah see.*

Who are those Wesley envisages wailing?

My contention is that Christian tradition points to the answer... “the Jews”.

The case is cumulative. First, I’d say that “Messiah” is itself not Christian language. Yes, I know, Handel! But, outside of Handel’s *Messiah*, Christians tend use words based on the Greek *Christos*, rather than the Hebrew, *Mashiach*. (Both mean the same: “Anointed”.) We are Christians, after all, and not Messiahists.¹ The references to selling the Messiah, and piercing him and seeing the one pierced, also have strong Jewish resonances. And, while we know it was the Romans, not the Jews, who actually crucified Jesus in history, the Romans had no concept of the Messiah. So the image of remorseful wailing, on seeing the true Messiah unveiled, works less well (if at all) if we have the Romans in mind.

I probably haven’t convinced you. So let me take you back to that Christian “tradition”. I am obliged to tell you that from very early days Christians, including the great theologians, including not a few of the great saints, had a tradition of saying “the Jews killed Christ”. And by “the Jews” they meant not just a bunch of people in 1st-century Jerusalem, but all Jews, throughout space, throughout time. The liturgist Melito may have been the first, towards the end of the second century (c 16—170 CE). He’s been called the “first poet of deicide”. In his liturgy, he accused the Jews - collectively, all Jews - of “killing God”. If he was the first, he was only the first.

¹ I am aware that the Semitic languages do use words related to the Hebrew, *Mashiach*, but this is definitely a hymn of the Western, Latin tradition.

St John Chrysostom (the golden-mouthed) wrote a series of sermons in the late fourth century (386/7 CE) called "Against the Jews". He accuses the Jews of being disobedient, carnal, demon-possessed. The tradition continues through Augustine, all the way down to Martin Luther. And our great saint-theologians have said that because "the Jews killed Christ" they are punished, damned and demeaned (descriptive). And they have meant that because "the Jews killed Christ" they should be punished, damned and demeaned (prescriptive).

Is this what you think of, if you sing the traditional words of this verse of this hymn?

Is this what modern worshippers think of?

Is this what Charles Wesley intended to convey?

I doubt it. Let me be clear: I doubt it.

But!

But the tradition of saying "the Jews killed Christ" has been so wide and so deep. It infected even theologians and saints. And it infected mobs and gangs throughout Christendom. It was so infectious that – again, I am obliged to tell you – over centuries, it was dangerous to be a Jew in Christian Holy Week. You were in danger of being attacked, by baptised, church-going Christians, because of that charge of "deicide". Though the charge was never formally taught, it was strongly implied by the shape and the details of the liturgy of Holy Week. The tradition is so wide and so deep that – I say – it places a burden on us, today. We bear the burden of making sure we do away with – eradicate, destroy - all such implications, whenever they bubble up.

You may now be thinking: “If what you say about Christian history is correct, I can see how this verse, using these words, is risky, is suspicious. But! But, honestly, Patrick, you’re taking all of this much too seriously! I really don’t think that hard about what I sing.” Well, I’m afraid I don’t stand down. On the contrary, I will say: it is precisely what we say or sing without thinking about it that shows what we really believe. Let me give another example: “There is a green hill far away, without a city wall, where...”. You will have added mentally: “the dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all”. And I even dare to suggest that those words you have supplied tell you important things about what you believe (or think Christians believe) about Jesus and his death, precisely because you didn’t think about them.

What we are not sure about, we have to think about. What we know in our bones, we don’t have to think about. They flow through us. They trip off the tongue. Those who don’t think about these words in this verse of *Lo He Comes*, then, often at least, “know” things (presume things) that they may struggle to articulate.

I am sorry. Not so much a transgressive sermon as a harsh one. But there is good news. The good news is that we can sing the hymn with full gusto, relishing all its Wesleyan wonders. And! And we don’t have to change a word. We don’t have to – because the hymn-book editors have done it for us. (You see: it really isn’t just me who has found the verse difficult.) They have changed “*Those who set at nought*” to “*We who set at nought*”.

And let's be clear here too. That is better theology. To stress: the change hasn't been made to avoid giving offence to Jews (or anybody). The change has been because the notion that "the Jews killed Christ" has always been plain wrong. Disgustingly wrong. Sinfully wrong. On purely Christian terms. Historically (as I have said), it was powerful players in the Roman Empire who killed Jesus. Theologically, it is the sins of all of us who killed Jesus (our own murderous instincts, our own willingness to stand by). The sins of all of us, starting, as always with the household of faith. We. We who set at nought and sold him.

Still not exactly good news, I admit. In truth, why our sins killed Christ is an important theme, but one for another place. But I will say, most assuredly, that it does lead to good news. Good news, happily summarised in the very next verse of the hymn:

Those dear tokens of his passion

Still his dazzling body bears

Cause of endless exultation

To his ransomed worshippers

With what rapture

(with what rapture,

with what rapture)

Gaze we on those glorious scars.

Amen.