

Stabat mater dolorosa
by
Jacopone da Todi (1230-1306)

A Reflection by Canon Jim Foley

The liturgical hymn known as Stabat Mater is another example of the great medieval tradition of religious poetry which has enriched the church for a thousand years. Unfortunately, it has suffered much the same fate as the Dies Irae and Vexilla Regis. It has quietly disappeared from the public liturgy of the Church since Vatican II. If it has survived longer than most, it is probably because of the Stations of the Cross, a devotion still popular during Lent and Passiontide.

One verse of our hymn is sung between the reflections associated with each Station. The verses are usually sung to a simple, but attractive plainsong melody, as the congregation processes around the church, pausing before each Station. The devotion itself, like the Christmas Crib, is attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi (1181-1226). It was certainly promoted by the Franciscan tradition of piety to the extent that, for many years, the Franciscans alone had the faculty to dedicate the Stations of the Cross in places of worship.

The Franciscans also pioneered research and excavations in the Holy Land in the hope of discovering the original Via Dolorosa across Jerusalem to Calvary. However, research by rival Jesuit and Dominican scholars in the Holy City has led to the promotion of other possible routes for the Via Dolorosa! While a student in Jerusalem I was surprised to see a citizen carrying a heavy wooden cross on his shoulders as he made his way, evidently unnoticed, along a busy street. I followed him but, unlike Simon of Cyrene, at a safe distance. It turned out that he was not pioneering yet another Via Dolorosa but was a carpenter on his way to make a delivery to one of the churches in time for Good Friday.

The influence of Saint Alphonsus Ligouri (1696-1787), founder of the Redemptorist order, served the cause of the Stations well, and with them the Stabat Mater, until recent years when his florid prayers and reflections seemed out of tune with modern times and are replaced by more contemporary prayers in keeping with the state of our world today.

A Mendicant Friar and a Troubadour

As a mendicant Friar and a wandering troubadour, Jacopone da Todi deserves more space than I feel able to afford him here. Nonetheless, something of his background may help us to understand his style and concerns. From the outset, however, it has to be said that to describe him as extremely eccentric would be an understatement. He appears to have been born into a reasonably comfortable family and to have enjoyed a successful career as a lawyer. At the age of forty his wife died in an accident and this tragic event led to a dramatic change in his life. He found consolation in his faith and particularly in his sense of sharing in the Passion of Jesus through his own experience of carrying the cross. He sold his possessions and gave such wealth as he had to the poor.

The conversion of Saint Francis of Assisi and the way in which he embraced abject poverty were still fresh in the memory of Jacopone and his contemporaries. To those who claimed he had taken leave of his senses he simply replied that he was happy to be counted 'a fool of Christ's sake.' It was in the spirit of Saint Francis that he joined the company of mendicant actors, preachers and poets travelling the length and breadth of his native Umbria, proclaiming in song and drama the Passion of Christ. The darker side of this zeal was his devastating attack on the abuses that had entered into even the strictest religious orders, as well as into the ranks of the clergy at large. He gave ten years of his life to this nomadic lifestyle.

The arrival and quick departure of Pope Celestine V July – December 1298

Jacopone's approach to life was given a powerful boost by the election as Pope in 1298 of a saintly Benedictine hermit called Pietro da Morrone. Incredible as it may seem, there was no cave sufficiently remote from civilization nor sufficiently deprived of even the basics for survival that measured up to his ascetic ambitions. If there was running water anywhere, it was running down the walls of the caves he chose to live in. Even in a nation that had more than its share of hermits, Pietro stood out a mile. In fact, he stood out so much that the cardinals gathered in conclave to elect a new Pope turned on him in desperation after two years of failed votes and constrained him to leave his cave and take the job under the name of Celestine V. He fled for his life ahead of the electors till they finally caught up with him and forced the Papal tiara on his head. He lasted six months, just long enough to re-write the Code of Canon Law and abdicate.

It is of more than passing interest that Pope Benedict XVI visited the tomb of Pope Celestine in Aquila in 2009, leaving there as a memento, his pallium, symbol of his status as Bishop of Rome. Some time later Benedict followed Celestine's example and resigned on 28 February 2013.

Pope Boniface VIII and the Holy Year of 1300

Jacopone's saga does not end there. Celestine's successor was from a very different strand of society, the aristocratic Gaetani family. He took a dim view of his predecessor's constant diatribe against the clergy and even against the Pope and had his followers, including Jacopone, excommunicated and locked up. The records show that he eventually died of a broken heart in 1296 at the age of 73. Little wonder.

The Stabat Mater rises out of this troubled world as a great monument to Saint Paul's claim that 'the power of God is to be seen in human frailty' and to Jacopone's stature as a humble Franciscan Friar who had a firm grip on the Gospel of the suffering poor, a deep devotion to the blessed Virgin, and a way with words.

The first five verses with a free English Translation

1

Stabat mater dolorosa
iuxta crucem lacrimosa,
dum pendebat filius;

Cuius animam gementem,
contristatam et dolentem,
pertransivit gladius.

+

There stood the mother of sorrows
in tears at the foot of the cross,
on which her son hung dying;

Her grieving soul,
now shared the painful sadness
that pierced it like a sword.

The first words of *Stabat mater* echo the first words of John the Evangelist's description of the company gathered at the foot of the cross: 'Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother...' (Jn 19.25ff). Much of what follows in our poem is inspired by that scene and especially by the presence of Mary the mother of Jesus who stands at the head of those named.

All four Evangelists are very close to each other in their descriptions of the Passion of Jesus. Each, however, has a quite unique insight of his own to offer. For the Evangelist Saint John that uniqueness concerns the place of Mary and her relationship with the Beloved Disciple: 'When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his home. That brief exchange evidently escaped the attention of the others. These words announce from the outset the special relationship, not only between Mary and the Beloved Disciple, but also between Mary and every Christian disciple, including Jacopone himself. From that moment Mary is firmly established as the Mother of the church.

All four Evangelists are also aware of the very mixed company present at the crucifixion and of their conflicting attitudes, yet none attempts to travel beyond this to explore the deep emotions of those present. Our Franciscan poet aspires to do exactly that in respect of Mary, and takes up where the Evangelist left off. Four sonorous and deeply emotional epithets ring out in quick succession: sorrowful, tearful, grieving, mourning, (*dolorosa / lacrimosa / gementem / dolentem*). The first verse ends where Mary's suffering began, in the shadow of the prophecy of Simeon that one day 'a sword would pierce her soul' (Luke 2.35). That day had now arrived.

2

O quam tristis et afflicta
fuit illa benedicta
mater unigeniti;

quae maerebat et dolebat,
cum videbat
nati poenas inclyti.

+

How deeply saddened and afflicted
was that blessed
Mother of her only child;

grieving still and full of pain
to contemplate
the sufferings of her divine son.

With verse 2 we are guided a little deeper into the emotions of Mary. She is the principal witness of the death of ‘her only Son.’ This title resonates down the ages from its first appearance in the saga of Abraham and his son Isaac (Genesis 22). That deeply moving and troubling chapter describes a father and son making their way ‘hand in hand’, secure in each other’s company, to the place where the son is to be sacrificed by his own father. The boy had nothing to fear in the company of his father who assured him that the Lord would provide everything they needed, including the victim. Abraham’s love for his son and his obedience to the will of God were to be tested to the limit. The Psalms likewise speak of the special grief occasioned by the death of an only son and heir. Yet there is more to be said about this son than that he stands alone as ‘her only son.’

Our verse ends with a further title that takes us beyond the limits of human experience to the sacrifice of the Son of God. Mary grieves at the death of ‘her glorious son / nati inclyti’. This title expresses the ultimate mystery behind the scene described. This scene, acted out within the compass of human history, finds its meaning in the Incarnation and in the death of the Son of God. ‘God loved the world so much that he gave his only son’ (John 3.16).

3

Quis est homo qui non fleret,
Christi matrem si videret
in tanto supplicio?

Quis non posset contristari,
piam matrem, contemplari
dolentem cum filio?

+

Is there any man who would not shed his tears
to see of the mother of Christ
steeped in such distress?

Who then would not be quick to share,
and contemplate the grief
she suffered with her only son.

With verse 3 our poet stands back from the scene at the foot of the cross and from the figure of Mary, to engage the attention of his audience and of the world at large. Our minds are carried back to a similar apostrophe addressed to mankind in the face of the suffering of the innocent: 'All you who pass by, look and see; is there any sorrow like my sorrow? (Lamentations 1.12).

There can be no excuse for those who, like the Priest and Levite, 'pass by on the other side' to escape from the very sight of human suffering. Mary had been the first to ponder the joyful mystery of her role in the birth of the redeemer (Luke 2.51). She now leads the company of those who ponder the tragic mystery of the death of the redeemer: 'who would not be quick to share...?' asks our poet. When others who should have known better fled, Mary stood her ground.

4

Pro peccatis suae gentis
vidit Iesum in tormentis
et flagellis subditum:

vidit suum dulcem natum
morientem desolatum,
dum emisit spiritum.

+

It was for the sins of his own people
She saw him in such torment
and subjected to reproach:

She saw her dear child
face his death deserted,
as he breathes forth his spirit.

Jacopone now dons the mantle of the theologian to address the reason for such unprecedented suffering of an innocent man. He does so in a manner not entirely at home within the great Franciscan tradition to which he belonged. The reason he produces to explain the agony of Jesus on the cross is 'the redemption of his own people'. In other words, the ultimate reason for the Incarnation of the Son of God and his crucifixion is redemption from sin and evil. This belief would establish itself in the subsequent life and dogma of the universal church especially through the influence of the Dominican school of theology led by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).

John Duns Scotus, like Jacopone, a Franciscan friar, took a different view. The Incarnation, the entry of the eternal Son of God in to our frail human world, was the providential plan in the mind of God from all eternity. His eternal son's presence would bring to perfection the entire plan of creation of a finite world. Indeed sin entered into this plan but only as a secondary motivation. Saint Paul would appear to share this view. However, the Church has learned to live at peace with both traditions.

Loyalty to one does not diminish respect for the other.

Our fourth verse finally returns to the image of Jesus on the cross as he ‘breathes forth his spirit’.

5

Pia mater, fons amoris,
me sentire vim doloris
fac ut tecum lugeam;

fac ut ardeat cor meum,
in amando Christum Deum
ut sibi complaceam.

+

Dear mother, wellspring of true love,
Share with me your depth of pain
that I may mourn with you
that my heart may burn
with love for Christ my God
and with him be reconciled.

Our fifth verse appears to take an early step in the direction of Mary as the Mediatrix of All Graces which has found wide acceptance in more recent times, whether in the debates about our Lady during Vatican II or in the ordinary teaching of recent Popes. The debate about this title and its implications is far from new in the church. Certainly, the use in our poem of such expressions as ‘the well-spring of true love’, and the petition that through Mary ‘I may be reconciled with Christ my God’ would point at least modestly in that direction. The hesitation, evidence at Vatican II concerning a dogmatic definition of Mary under this title, is probably best explained as a recognition of the ecumenical dialogue with Protestant Churches which have always been nervous of anything that appeared to compromise the identity of Christ as the one Lord and Mediator.

Appendix

Little need be said about the poetic quality of this hymn. It adheres to a tight set of rules with eight syllables in each line with the exception of the third and sixth lines in each verse. This pattern allows each verse to fall into two quite equal parts with each ending in what Shakespeare like to describe as ‘a dying fall’. The meter is trochaic dimeter – a long syllable followed by a short syllable.

The rhyming scheme is equally disciplined following the same pattern of aabccb throughout.