






Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

-  We Have Never Seen His Face
(*Suffering*, pp. 29-35)

-  Transcending Cultures
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-  My Redeemer Lives
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What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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We Have Never Seen His Face

How we depict the face of Christ reveals both whom we follow and who we are as his disciples. Shusaku Endo's celebrated novel, *Silence*, challenges us to see "one who 'suffers with us' and who allows for our weakness."

Prayer (from John 1:14b)

O God, we confess that "we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

Scripture Reading: Psalm 22:1, 14-18

Responsive Reading¹

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Were you there when they pierced him in the side?

Were you there when the sun refused to shine?

Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Reflection

Why do we recoil from depictions of Jesus' suffering? Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) is controversial, not least because many would agree with critic Roger Ebert's view, "This is the most violent film I have ever seen."² He warns, "You must be prepared for whippings, flayings, beatings, the crunch of bones, the agony of screams, the cruelty of the sadistic centurions, the rivulets of blood that crisscross every inch of Jesus' body."

Ebert, who was raised as a Catholic, recalls praying at the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday. "For we altar boys, this was not necessarily a deep spiritual experience. Christ suffered, Christ died, Christ rose again, we were redeemed, and let's hope we can get home in time to watch the Illinois basketball game on TV," he writes. "What Gibson has provided for me, for the first time in my life, is a visceral idea of what the Passion consisted of." Unlike those Hollywood biblical epics that look "like holy cards brought to life," this film doesn't turn "Jesus and his disciples into neat, clean, well-barbered middle-class businessmen."

How we depict Jesus can shape us morally. Brett Dewey explains how Shusaku Endo (1923-1996), the famed Japanese novelist and Catholic Christian, reproached "western Christianity for failing to depict in Christ's face the terrible suffering and sorrow that are so much a part of God's incarnation into the fullness of human experience." He believed that Western forms of faith based on "those Sunday school images of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, Jesus that attempt to portray the Savior as attractive, heroic, and pristine...[have] promoted a triumphal missionary strategy and underpinned Western cultural hegemony. The church sought to imitate that Sunday school Jesus by being attractive, powerful, and heroic to the point of trying to save native peoples from their 'undeveloped' cultures. The problem was that these people were transferred into a new culture not of kingdom freedom, but of western dominance."



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Study Questions

1. Recall the central action of Shusaku Endo's *The Silence* – the temptation of the young missionary Rodrigues to trample on the face of Christ. Why does Rodrigues trample?
2. How, according to the appendix of *The Silence*, did Rodrigues' action shape his Christian ministry? How did it help form the secret Christian community in Japan?
3. Compare Stradano's *Crucifixion* (cover), He Qi's *The Crucifixion* (p. 36), and Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion* (p. 38). How does each artist depict Christ's suffering?
4. A motley group of people surrounds the dying Christ in He Qi's painting "Crucifixion" (p. 36). What would Christ's death on the cross mean to those persons?
5. What does Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion* (p. 38) suggest about the role of interpreters, indeed layers of them, in helping us to understand the suffering of Christ?
6. The departing hymn originally was titled "Crucifixion to the World by the Cross of Christ," for it is a meditation on Paul's pledge: "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). How does Isaac Watts' text carry us into the Apostle's strange idea?
7. Does your congregation display crucifixes or empty crosses? What hymns do you sing about the Crucifixion? What do these teach members about discipleship and suffering?

Departing Hymn: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" (verses 1, 3, 4, and 5)

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

His dying crimson, like a robe,
spreads o'er His body on the tree;
then I am dead to all the globe,
and all the globe is dead to me.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.

Isaac Watts, *HYMNS AND SPIRITUAL SONGS* (1707)
Suggested Tunes: HAMBURG or O WALY WALY

¹From "Were You There?" J. W. Johnson and J. R. Johnson, *American Negro Spirituals* (1926)

²Roger Ebert, "The Passion of the Christ," February 24, 2004, (rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040224/REVIEWS/402240301/1023).

We Have Never Seen His Face

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Galatians 6:11-18
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss paintings and hymn
Questions 1, 2, and 7	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 7	Questions 3, 4, 5, and 6
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To ask how we depict the suffering of Christ.
2. To explore how these depictions reflect both who Christ is and who we are as his disciples.
3. To discuss how Scripture, Christian artwork, and hymns either inform or distort our interpretation of Christ's suffering.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Suffering (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," locate a tune, either HAMBURG or O WALY WALY, in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

"The great good news of the Gospel, theologian Herbert McCabe says, is this: 'If you do not love you will not be alive; if you do love effectively you will be killed.' Jesus is evidence that loving effectively leads to death. He 'suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried,' the earliest confessions declare in the briefest of summary. Jesus refused to set up an earthly regime or to abuse the power that was his as Son" (*Suffering*, p. 35).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer of confession in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 22:1, 14-18 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Ask members to recall paintings, films, and stories about Jesus' suffering that "portray the Savior as attractive, heroic, and pristine." Do they agree with Shusaku Endo's point that how we depict the face of Jesus not only reflects who Jesus is, but also who we are as his disciples?

Since it brings into conversation several pieces of art, this study has sufficient material for two rich sessions. The group might discuss Endo's novel and Watt's hymn in one session and the three paintings by Stradano, He Qi, and Carpaccio in a second session.

Study Questions

1. Briefly introduce the main characters: the missionary Rodrigues, his mentor Ferreira, and his treacherous guide Kichijiro. Describe the scene of the Christian peasants facing torture in "the pit" if they do not re-

cant their faith by trampling on the *fumie*. The central action of Rodrigues' trampling the *fumie* occurs after his vision of Christ, whose "face was different from that on which the priest had gazed so often in Portugal, in Rome, in Goa and in Macao." The irony is that Rodrigues tramples Christ's face not out of fear or even compassion for the Japanese peasants (since he values his reputation above their welfare), but "in obedience to the Christ" who says "You may trample. I allow you to trample."

2. Rodrigues discovers that Christ "takes on the pain of the world in his mission to fulfill the will of the Father," and calls us to share his suffering by sacrificing our pride of place. "Endo does not depict his suffering as a social strategy, as an efficient way to accomplish his witness or share the Gospel," Dewey says. "It is not good in itself, and is not the way life is supposed to be. Yet suffering with God is a matter of fidelity, even when, in a dramatic irony, Rodrigues' accepting the stigma of apostasy becomes his route to faithfulness." Later Rodrigues marries a Japanese woman and leads the Christians as "Apostate Paul." Ferreira is "Apostate Peter." Kichijiro is restored. "Their church is a place for weakness and forgiveness; its leaders are redeemed Sauls, and Peters, and Judases. Theirs is a broken community, whose triumph consists in participating in God's mission of sacrificial love to the world."
3. Stradano follows the biblical accounts more closely and depicts them more realistically than He Qi or Carpaccio. Yet Christ's body is stronger and his face more composed in Stradano's painting, even though he depicts the last events before Jesus' death (cf. Mark 15:33-37). How is Jesus' suffering represented in He Qi's and Carpaccio's works? Consider the distress on the faces of those around Jesus, for his suffering may be "reflected" in theirs.
4. Many of the people suffer separation and loneliness. The imprisoned man is separated from the town and the other people, his jail cell floating in the space behind the cross. From opposite directions two single women come to the cross – one who is naked (the woman caught in adultery?) may be shunned, and the one grieving for a dead child is alone in her suffering. The injured man at the foot of the cross seems to be abandoned. All find themselves outside the distant town now. Several suffer physical disability or illness, while others endure legal guilt or social shame and alienation. For how long have these people suffered?
 Jesus bears their suffering on the cross. Notice how his hands, like theirs, are exaggerated. His are marred by the open wounds caused by the nails.
5. St. Jerome and Job together interpret Christ's death amid the larger wreckage and decay of the world, and from the frailty of their own bodies. They meet with viewers in one space and at one time, allowing us to learn from each of them. Carpaccio suggests we cannot know the meaning of Christ's death without taking into account all of this rich perspective.
6. Paul adds a summary note in his own hand (6:11). Those who are urging the Galatians to be circumcised and adopt ritual signs of Jewish distinctiveness do not want to "be persecuted for the cross of Christ" (6:12). Perhaps this means they want to earn their standing with God and are embarrassed by Christ's suffering for them, for it is a reminder of their sin and need. Paul says the Crucifixion changes everything, from how we value ourselves to how we see others. Watts hymn leads us from "foolish pride" to submitting our will to God.
7. Members may mention carvings, sculptures, paintings, posters, or emblems depicting the Crucifixion or the cross that are on display in places of worship or study. They may mention publications with photographs or drawings. When do members notice these? Are they referred to in public worship, or are they noticed privately? What hymns or songs about the Crucifixion are often sung? Does the hymnal have other hymns about Christ's suffering that are rarely sung? Are these used as meditative readings? Some places of worship today look as though no suffering ever goes on. By looking around the church building and grounds and by hearing the hymns sung, would visitors know that the church (in N. T. Wright's words) is where we "learn to suffer and pray at the place where the world is in pain, so that the world may be healed"? Would young children in the church know?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.