2021-04-02 Lament of the Mother of God – Woe is me, my Child!

Today is Good Friday. In unusual detail, the four Gospel accounts report the unfair trial, the cruel Roman-style whipping and beating, the long trudge on the *via dolorosa*, and the crucifixion, the Empire’s ultimate capital punishment for insurrection—the most painful death the Empire could devise.

Of the four gospels, only John’s reports that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was at the scene, supported by her sister (who would have been Jesus’s aunt) and at least several other women, some of whom had been financing Jesus for the past three years. Somehow, they had learned what was happening, and arrived at ”The Place of the Skull” in time to witness the last of the six hours of agony before he died.

Suddenly, in less than 24 hours, all hopes and dreams for the future kingdom were dashed, just like that. There he was, hanging, his body’s weight most painfully pulling against the nails, as he struggled to prevent his head from sinking and suffocating.

Many paintings and songs have depicted Mary’s sorrow, both as mother and as the faithful handmaiden of God. Today, we will hear John Tavener’s “The Lament of the Mother of God”.

When he was a young adult, Tavener converted to the Greek Orthodox faith (joining the branch which worships in English). In the Orthodox tradition, the Lament of the Mother of God is sung on Good Friday and can last 90 minutes. Tavener’s Lament is only 15 minutes. Tavener tells us that The Lament (quote) must be sung with an ikon-like stillness and great purity. It grows in intensity as it climbs in tessitura, but without anything sudden or remotely melodramatic. (end quote)

In the text, I have shown how the composition ‘climbs in tessitura’. We have a series of eight verses, each starting with the words, “Woe is me, my Child.” The soprano soloist, representing Mary, begins very quietly on the pitch A, the A above middle C. She always sings this first line of each verse in a descending manner, meandering down the scale. To me, this descending line portrays the way her grief is weighing her down.

[ex 1:00]

Each subsequent verse begins a note higher, with the same descending line. This rise in pitch from verse to verse, quietly provides intensity to the Lament, each verse becoming a bit more tense. The supporting choir also grows in volume, ever so slightly, and the sopranos always hold the soloist’s first pitch of each verse.

The final two lines sung by the choir are explained by Tavener, and again, I quote, “For the Orthodox Church there is never the sense of absolute desolation felt by the western Church on Good Friday. Hence the cry of the Mother of God, “Dost thou change my grief to gladness by thy Resurrection?”, followed by the full forces singing: “Rise O God, and judge the earth.”

2021-04-02 Meditation for Good Friday is now available at:  <https://pgimf.org/meditations/>

**Lament of the Mother of God – Woe is me, my Child**

Music: John Tavener (1944-2013; composed 1988)

Artist: Solveig Kringelborn (soprano)

Winchester Cathedral Choir, David Hill (dir.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58XG1BmHsGI>

[For each line of text, the soloist’s melody will meander downward through the octave]

[Soprano begins on A above middle C, while sopranos hold the initial A]

Woe is me, my Child!

I see Thee, dearest and beloved Child,

hanging upon the cross,

and my heart is bitterly wounded.

But in Thy love, speak some word to Thy handmaiden.

[Soprano begins one step higher on B]

Woe is me, my Child!

I wish to take my son down from the wood

and to hold Him in my arms

as once I held Him when He was a little child;

But alas, there is no-one to give Him to me.

[Soprano begins one-half step higher on C]

Woe is me, my Child!

I see Thee bruised and wounded,

without glory, stripped upon the cross.

O my Child, and my heart burns.

[Soprano begins one step higher on D]

Woe is me, my Child!

In my arms, I hold Thee as a corpse,

O loving Lord, who has brought the dead back to life;

Grievously is my heart wounded,

and I long to die with Thee,

for I cannot bear to look upon Thee lifeless and without breath.

[Soprano begins one step higher on E; as the work grows in intensity, we begin to abandon the descending melodies:]

Woe is me, my Child!

I reflect, O Master: how never again shall I hear Thy voice.

Never again shall Thy handmaiden see the beauty of Thy face

as in the past, for Thou, my Son,

hast sunk down before mine eyes.

[Soprano begins one-half step higher on F]

Woe is me, my child!

Where dost thou go, my Child?

Why dost thou run so swiftly?

Is there another wedding in Cana,

and are thou hastening there to turn the water into wine?

Shall I go with thee, my child,

or shall I wait for thee?

Speak some word to me, O Word;

Do not pass me by in silence.

Thou hast preserved my virginity,

and thou art my Son and God.

[Soprano begins one step higher on G]

Woe is me, my child!

Release me from agony

and take me with Thee, O my Son and God.

Let me also descend with Thee, O Master, into Hell.

Leave me not to live alone,

for I cannot bear to look upon Thee, my sweet Light.

[Soprano begins one step higher on A]

Woe is me, my child,

Woe is me, my child, woe is me

light of mine eyes and delivered from of my womb,

For what Simeon foretold in the temple:

A sword pierces my heart;

but dost Thou change my grief to gladness by Thy resurrection.

[Continues on the high A.

Five years later, Tavener quotes from this ending for the conclusion to “Song for Athene”]

Rise, O God, and judge the Earth!

Rise, O God, and judge the Earth!

[Soprano ends, alone, on the original A]

Woe is me, my child.

Evan

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Although this series of Meditations will conclude on Easter 2021,

past Meditations remain available on our website.