

Poetry of Redemption

AN ILLUSTRATED TREASURY
OF GOOD FRIDAY AND
EASTER POEMS

Leland Ryken

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ryken, Leland, editor.

Title: Poetry of redemption : An illustrated treasury of Good Friday and Easter poems / [edited by] Leland Ryken.

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing, [2023] | Summary: "This beautiful anthology features readings on the events of Holy Week and our response. Ryken examines forty hymns, poems, and Scripture texts in a celebration of their artistry and meaning"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022045278 | ISBN 9781629959757 (paperback) | ISBN 9781629959511 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Holy Week--Prayers and devotions. | Holy Week--Meditations. | Jesus Christ--Passion--Meditations. | Christian poetry.

Classification: LCC BV90 .T74 2023 | DDC 263/.925--dc23/eng/20221207
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022045278>

FOR PHILIP AND LISA



Eric Gill, *The Resurrection*, 1917



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Pieter Bruegel the Younger,
The Crucifixion, ca. 1617



Introduction

THIS BOOK IS AN ANTHOLOGY of poetic devotionals on the events of Holy Week and their meaning. Although the entries can be read in the days before and during Holy Week, the book is not organized according to a schedule of daily readings tied to the calendar. One can read this anthology anytime, using any timetable, covering as many of the entries at a single reading as one chooses.

Three types of texts make up the readings. They correspond to the three categories listed in a famous New Testament passage that enjoins Christians to address one another “in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19). This anthology uses the designation *psalms* to refer to poems that are (a) taken from the Bible and (b) printed in the verse form of all biblical poetry, namely, parallelism of phrases and clauses. It uses the designation *hymns* to refer to the texts of familiar Holy Week songs, which are here presented and analyzed as devotional poems. We need to remind ourselves that every hymn begins its life as a poem, becoming a hymn only when it is paired with music and sung. The “spiritual songs” in this anthology are classic literary poems, written by the “greats” of English poetry, on the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus.

The table of contents shows how the organization of this anthology follows the chronology of Holy Week. The contents are balanced between describing what happened during Holy Week and applying those events in the lives of believers.

The overall genre of this anthology is variously called devotional literature and meditative or contemplative literature. Devotional literature is designed to fix our thoughts on God and the spiritual life and to awaken our religious affections. This is the intended orientation and goal of the entries in this anthology.

To call the entries meditative or contemplative identifies the means by which their devotional effect is achieved. The basic structure of a meditative work was codified by a method that dates back to the Middle Ages. Its three-phase procedure is all but inevitable. The first phase is called *composing the scene*, which refers to recalling an event from the Bible and imagining oneself being present at it. The second phase consists of analyzing the details that make up the scene and event. Whereas composing the scene is based on memory and imagination, the second phase—*analysis of meaning*—is rooted in understanding. The third phase is *response*. We today might call it an *action plan*. It activates our will to respond with thanksgiving, resolve, and the expression of other feelings and by petitioning God.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of this meditative paradigm to the entries in this anthology. Because the foundation of the poems is the events of Holy Week, most of the poems contain some element of composing the scene. But the strategy of the poets is never merely to recreate the events. Instead, their poems lead us to analyze the spiritual meanings of those events and then prompt us to respond appropriately.

Although the contemplative paradigm places the three phases in a sequential order, the mixture is much more fluid in poems and hymns. Often the phases are repeated in individual stanzas of a poem and do not determine the structure of the poem as a whole. What matters for us as readers is that we keep the three ingredients—composing the scene, analyzing the meaning, responding—in our awareness.

This helps us to understand the devotional nature of the content in this theology, but how are we to understand its *poetic* nature? Five aspects of poetry must be kept firmly in mind.

Poetry arranges its content into lines. In prose, the sentence is the recurrent unit, and the flow of text runs all the way to the right margin of the page and then wraps around to the left margin. Thoughts in poetry are packaged into lines, a much more compressed form of expression that gives more “bang for the buck” than prose sentences do. This requires more careful attention on the part of the reader. The packaging of content into lines and groups of lines is also more artful than prose, displaying skill in the handling of language and syntax (sentence structure).

Poetry is packaged in the form of stanzas. The arrangement of poetic lines into stanzas gives them another layer of tightness and control. Individual stanzas possess a unity within themselves. They are not random



collections of details. We therefore need to analyze how a stanza is organized, including what constitutes the unity of a stanza.

Poems are organized on a principle of theme and variation. Every well-composed poem has a unifying theme or “big idea.” In the overwhelming number of instances, we can trust the poem’s first line or two to clue us into its unifying theme. Everything that follows expands on that theme. Rather than repeating their main ideas, poets *elaborate* on them through variations within stanzas. Thus we need to analyze how individual stanzas contribute to the elaboration of a poem’s main idea.

Poems express ideas in images and figures of speech. Whereas prose, such as the prose of this introduction, tends toward an abstract vocabulary, poetry names concrete things and actions (*images*). In addition, poets tend to think in terms of *analogy*, in which one thing is compared

Benjamin West, *Angel of the Resurrection*, 1801

to another. Metaphor, simile, and symbol are common forms of such comparison. Because poets think in images and figures of speech, so must we as readers. We need to take the time, and expend the mental energy, required to unpack the meanings that are embodied in individual images and comparisons. Poetry requires a slow read.

Poetry is expressed in rhythm and rhyme. All the poems in this anthology are written in regular rhythm or *meter*, and most of them employ rhyming sounds at the ends of their lines. These constitute the music of poetry and are part of its verbal beauty. The effects of sound are part of the experience of poetry, even in silent reading, but the effects are largely unnoticed. We do not need to analyze the meter and rhyme scheme of a poem to experience it fully, though it is pleasurable to do so. Regardless of our level of analysis, we need to credit poets for casting utterances into smooth-flowing, regular meter and ending their poetic lines with rhyming sounds that follow a set pattern from one stanza to the next.

Each of the poems in this anthology is accompanied by an *explication*. This is the term used by literary scholars to describe a literary analysis and explanation of the form and content of a poem. A good explication is not a random collection of insights but an organized exploration. We can think of an explicator as a tour guide who chooses what sites to visit, who points and says, “Look at that,” and who interprets what the tourists are seeing.

The explications in this anthology are comprised of (1) a brief context for the poem, including where appropriate its author and composition; (2) a statement of the unifying theme of the poem and an analysis of how the individual stanzas are variations on that theme; (3) a discussion of the poem’s artistic effects and verbal beauty; (4) an exploration of the theological content of the poem, with an eye on how the poem relates to the main focus of this anthology, namely, the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus; and (5) a concluding sentence or two that makes the poem’s devotional takeaway explicit.

The best way to combine each devotional passage with its explication is first to read the devotional entry, then to read the explication as a way of reaching a fuller understanding and enjoyment of the work, and then to read the devotional a second time, using the explication as a lens through which to view the passage. Each entry also includes a passage from the Bible that brings the entire poem and explication under a unifying umbrella, stated with the authority that only the Bible can offer. ■

PROLOGUE

The prayers that comprise this prologue are a portal through which we may enter both Holy Week and this anthology. They show us at a glance that the events of Holy Week move from Palm Sunday to Good Friday to Easter and direct our attention to the anticipated resurrection at the last day. ■



Fernando Gallego, *The Agony in the Garden*
(detail), 1480–88

Prayers for Holy Week

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

Palm Sunday

Blessed is the King
 who comes in the name of the Lord.
Assist us mercifully with your help,
 O Lord God of our salvation,
that we may enter with joy
 upon the contemplation of your mighty acts,
whereby you have given us life and immortality,
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.
It is right to praise you, Almighty God,
 for the acts of love by which you have redeemed us
 through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

On this day he entered the holy city of Jerusalem in
triumph,
 and was proclaimed as King of kings
by those who spread their garments
 and branches of palm along his way.
Let these branches be for us signs of his victory,
 and grant that we who bear them in his name
may ever hail him as our King,
 and follow him in the way that leads to eternal life.

Good Friday

Almighty God, we pray you graciously
to behold us your family,
for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed,
and given into the hands of sinners,
and to suffer death upon the cross,
who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever.

Our heavenly Father sent his Son into the world,
not to condemn the world,
but that the world through him might be saved,
that all who believe in him
might be delivered from the power of sin and death,
and become heirs with him of everlasting life.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God,
we pray you to set your passion, cross, and death
between your judgment and our souls,
now and in the hour of our death.
Give mercy and grace to the living;
pardon and rest to the dead;
to your holy church peace and concord;
and to us sinners everlasting life and glory.

Holy Saturday

O God, Creator of heaven and earth,
grant that, as the crucified body of your dear Son
was laid in the tomb and rested on this holy Sabbath,
so we may await with him the coming of the third day,
and rise with him to newness of life.

Easter

Almighty God, who through thine only-begotten Son
hast overcome death
and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life,
grant, we beseech thee, that we may be found worthy
to attain to everlasting joys,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who liveth and reigneth with thee
and the Holy Ghost forever,
one God, world without end.

Grant, O Lord, that through the gate of death
we may pass to our joyful resurrection,
through his merits, who died, and was buried,
and rose again for us,
thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

We humbly beseech thee, O Father,
to raise us from the death of sin
unto the life of righteousness;
that, when we shall depart this life,
we may rest in him;
and that, at the general resurrection in the last day,
we may be found acceptable in thy sight,
and receive that blessing,
which thy well-beloved Son shall then pronounce
to all who love and fear thee. ■

THE PURPOSE OF A DEVOTIONAL is to orient us toward God and ultimately to unite us to him. What better way to achieve that goal than to address God directly through prayer? The fact that the prayers in today's reading are phrased in the plural offers an additional blessing. We are aware as we read that we are joining the church universal in expressing our thoughts, but this in no way reduces the personal application since we are also expressing what we feel and believe as individuals.

As we will see in every entry of this anthology, poets are our representatives. They say what we ourselves wish to say, only they say it better. Today's entry demonstrates this truth to a preeminent degree.

Reading a prayer as a devotion take us beyond simply praying it. To ponder the truth of what we are reading is inherent to devotional contemplation, so when we read the poetic fragments printed above, we can take as long as we need to understand their ideas, subject them to analysis and reflection, and codify our responses. As we reflect on individual statements from the prayer book, we need to see how what is expressed in prayer correlates with the events of Holy Week. We should ask, "Why *this* particular assertion or petition in light of Palm Sunday or Good Friday or Easter?"

Is the Book of Common Prayer poetic? It is. Much of its beauty is due to what is technically called *cadence*—the rise and fall of language and phrases. Even when it is printed as prose, we feel intuitively that its short phrases and clauses are just asking to be printed as poetic lines and stanzas. The prayer book was written in the same era as the King James Bible, and both are the very essence of verbal beauty—elegant in style, sweeping us up into something beautiful and grand. We leave our reading feeling that we have been in the presence of something great.

This devotional entry has a twofold takeaway: it ensures that the entire sweep of Holy Week is fixed in our minds as a coherent whole, and it leads us to ponder the individual events of that week and their spiritual meaning for our lives. ■

The following passage covers the broad sweep of Holy Week in a manner similar to the entry from the Book of Common Prayer: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3–4).

Georges de La Tour, *The Repentant Magdalen*, ca. 1635/40

