

O Sacred Head, Now Wounded

Isaiah 53:5

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

During this lenten season we will take an in depth look at some familiar lenten hymns. These are hymns which we have sung for so many years. They sound like lent to our ears. They are easy to sing. And they stir many deep emotions in our hearts and souls with their minor chords and melodies.

But what is the deeper story behind these hymns? Who wrote them and the tunes that go with them? What Scripture underlies each song?

Today we are going to answer some of those questions regarding hymn 105. The hymnal gives a little information. The author is attributed to be Bernard of Clairveaux. He was born in 1091 and died at the age of 63 in 1153. The hymn was latter translated into German by Paul Gerhardt, who was a pastor in post-reformation era Germany. The hymn found its way into The Lutheran Hymnal (TLH) what many people in our congregation commonly refer to as “the blue hymnal.”

What you may not know is the story behind the hymn. Here it is:

Bernard was born in the area of Dijon, France in the region of Burgundy. His father was a knight to the Duke of Burgundy. Bernard’s father died in the first crusade, and his mother died when he was 14 years old. In 1112 A.D. he chose a life of asceticism (living a poor and humble life before the Lord) and became a Cistercian monk. Three years later at the age of 24 he founded his own Monastery in east-central France, in the Wormwood Valley. The community was called “beautiful valley” or Clairveaux in French. Thus we know the man as Bernard of Clairveaux. In the Catholic church he is also called St. Bernard, yes like the dog of the Alps.

Bernard was a respected man in the church community. He healed a rift in the Catholic church by his dealing and negotiations. He was instrumental in the excommunication of a well-known heretic in the church named Peter Abelard. His preaching is credited with helping to organize the Second Crusade, which later ended in disaster. Bernard wrote an apology for this tragedy later on in his life. He lived such an ascetic lifestyle that his body was extremely thin. His haggard appearance alone was reported to have made a deep impression on his audiences.

Enough about the man, what about the hymn? This hymn was one of seven hymns originally written in Latin. One was sung on each day of Holy Week. Each hymn focused on a different part of the body of our dying Lord.

Ad Pedes: to the feet.	O Sacred Feet
Ad Genua: to the knees.	O Sacred Knees
Ad Manus: to the hands.	O Sacred Hands
Ad Latus: to the side.	O Sacred Side
Ad Pectus: to the breast.	O Sacred Breast
Ad Cor: to the heart.	O Sacred Heart
Ad Faciem: to the face or head.	O Sacred Head

The Roman Catholic tradition says that while contemplating the crucifix Bernard had a vision that the image of Christ leaned down from the cross and embraced him. This is what inspired Bernard to write the hymn, O Sacred Head, Now Wounded.

The text of the hymn, especially verse 4, follows loosely Isaiah 53:5 “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

And verse 4 of hymn 105 reads:

My burden in your passion, Lord, you have borne for me,
For it was my transgression, My shame, on Calvary.
I cast me down before you; Wrath is my rightful lot.
Have mercy, I implore you; Redeemer, spurn me not!

I don't know about Catholic tradition, and the story of the vision of the figure of Christ bending down from the crucifix to embrace him. But the knowledge of sin, our burden, our transgressions, our iniquities is universal. Bernard felt that burden. We too feel that burden of sin. Especially during lent, the somber season, the minor key of the hymns, even the often gray season of the year itself, all remind us that we are sinners. That we are dust and to dust we will return.

But Bernard also was well aware that Jesus' death was for him and his sin. He knew the verses of Isaiah 53 just as we do. That “he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.” Jesus went to the cross for us. The verse from Isaiah tells us of God's great exchange. Jesus took our punishment, we receive the peace he won for us.

“The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” The same verse is used at the beginning of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Jesus won forgiveness for us on the cross. The Sacred Head of Christ was wounded for us.

Because of Jesus' sacrifice, we are prepared for heaven. As the last verse of the hymn goes, and with this thought we will close:

Lord, be my consolation, My shield when I must die;
Remind me of your passion When my last hour draws nigh.
My eyes will then behold you, Upon your cross will dwell;
My heart will then enfold you – Who dies in faith dies well! Amen.