Great is Thy Faithfulness?
Reading Lamentations as Sacred Scripture

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Lamentations and Christian Worship

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In the current Roman Catholic ordo, the text of Lamentations is used at Mass only on Saturdays of the twelfth week of ordinary time, in the second of the two cycles of readings. The selection is from Lam 2:2, 11–14, 18–19, and speaks of the predicament of the people who have been punished for their sins. This text is coupled with the Gospel passage of Matthew (Matt 8:5–17) in which the centurion pleads for the life of his paralyzed servant. Jesus takes the opportunity to condemn those who fail to accept his teaching and will be "turned out into the dark, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth" (v. 12).

The most significant use of Lamentations, however, was in the traditional service known as "Tenebrae," which was the service of Matins and Lauds that was celebrated on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday of Holy Week. The service took place late at night, or very early in the morning, and so in the hours of darkness. An array of fifteen lit candles would be placed in the view of everyone on a candelabrum known as a "hearse." The service began with a silent Our Father, Hail Mary, and Creed, followed by three psalms with an antiphon for each. As each psalm or canticle finished, one of the candles was extinguished. The third psalm and antiphon was followed by a versicle and a response, and another silent Our Father. At this point Scripture would be proclaimed or chanted, with a response at the end of each section. Thus concluded the first of a set of three "nocturnes." From this service of Matins the ceremony would move immediately to Lauds, with another series of Psalms and antiphons. During the singing of the Benedictus the six candles on the altar were extinguished. Eventually only one central candle was left. This candle was removed and held out of sight until after the singing of Christus factus est and the Miserere (Ps 50), followed by a final prayer. At this point, there would a great banging of seats, books, and other materials for a short while, known as the strepitus, to commemorate the earthquake from the narratives of the Passion, until the lit candle was returned to view. This was the signal for the end of Tenebrae. The dramatic and musical content of the service was very attractive and so it was a popular part of the celebration of the Holy Week liturgies in parishes with the musical resources to celebrate it properly.
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The service grew less popular when it was moved to mornings in the 1955 reform of Holy Week, and it fell out of use in most places after the renewal of the liturgy after the Second Vatican Council.

The proclamation of the Lamentations took place during the first Nocturn on each of the three days. The common practice was that members of the choir would sing in a particular order, beginning with the youngest voice. The great composers of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance created significant settings of these Lamentations texts, and also of the responsories between each portion of the Lamentations texts.

There was, therefore, a triple context into which the text of the Lamentations was placed.

1. First, there was the importance of the days themselves at which these texts were proclaimed: the first day, with the commemoration of the Lord’s Supper and his Agony in Gethsemane; the second day with the betrayal, trial, and crucifixion of Christ; and finally Saturday, with Christ in the tomb and the world awaiting his resurrection.

2. Secondly, there was the context of the psalms which would be chanted before the Lamentation text.

3. Finally, there was also the immediate context of the sung responsory after each Lamentation text, which told the story at each stage of the Passion narrative.

Thursday: Ps 68, 69, and 70 were chanted, and the Lamentation texts were from Lam 1:1–5, 6–9, and 10–14. The set psalms are themselves very much of the genre of lament: cries of distress and anguish, which speak of the shame of the psalmist, of the insults and pain inflicted, of the sackcloth and the vinegar (Ps 68). There is a cry for rescue and for shame to be brought against those who attack the psalmist (Ps 69). This is repeated in Ps 70, which ends with words of hope and expectation of rescue. It would have been a relatively simple matter for participants to connect the predicament of the psalmist with those of Christ at this crucial moment in his life. The Lamentation texts for this service speak of the affliction that has come to the city as a result of the crimes of the people, ending with an appeal to Jerusalem to return to the Lord. After verses 1 to 5 the responsory speaks of Christ on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the city. After verses 6 to 9 we hear of the betrayal by Judas, and after verses 10 to 14 the words of the Suffering Servant (“surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows”, etc., Isa 53) are used to make clear that both Isaiah and Jeremiah speak prophetically of the sufferings of Christ.

Friday: The psalms for the first Nocturn were 2, 21, and 26, and the texts of Lamentations were from Lam 2:8–11, 12–15 and from Lam 3:1–9. Again, there would be an understandable connection made by participants with the sufferings of Our Lord. Psalm 2 speaks of those who plot against the Lord and his anointed one. In Ps 21, the psalmist expresses the pain and suffering of someone who feels abandoned by God. This psalm was also chanted during the solemn stripping of the altar at the end of the Holy Thursday ceremonies, so there would have been resonances with the dramatic connotati-