

March 29, Passion Sunday A (Matthew 26:14–27:66)

Matthew's Passion doesn't show us Jesus' reactions. We just see his pain and hear his silence.

by [Katie Kirk-Costas](#) in the [March 2026](#) issue

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Kids ask their priests a lot of “why” questions that I can’t answer. “Why aren’t we made of glitter?” Or, scarier: “Why did Jesus have to die?” Or they give unsolicited answers I’m not prepared for: Once, a child came up after the Stations of the Cross with a drawing of a crucifix, saying it was about “Good Friday, when God died for God.” The Passion gospel story brings out our deepest “why” questions, questions that resist trite answers and demand to be taken seriously.

Matthew mostly sidesteps the “why” questions in his account of the Passion, focusing less on the mechanics of atonement and more on the people who had to witness Jesus’ death, who probably had to explain the scene to their inquisitive children afterward. Jesus himself remains silent in the face of questions. We hear others’ actions interpreted; for Jesus, we don’t even see his reactions. We only see his pain and hear his silence. Matthew just makes us, like Mary, watch.

First, Matthew shows us a silent Jesus with a conflicted Pilate. As Pilate interrogates Jesus, Jesus only gives a nonanswer (“you say so”) or no answer at all. Jesus’ emotions remain unknown, but Matthew tells us that Pilate “was greatly amazed,” thrown off-kilter by Jesus’ silence in the face of his own death. We know that Pilate has learned the motive for Jesus’ arrest: “He realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.” We hear Pilate’s wife’s opinions, even the content of her dreams. And, of course, we find out why Pilate washes his hands of the matter: “Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning.”

The scene changes; soldiers surround Jesus to mock him. Amid vivid descriptions of what the soldiers did to Jesus, we hear nothing of Jesus’ reactions. We know the color of Jesus’ “royal” robe and the material of his “crown” and “scepter.” We see him exposed and abused, naked and hit on the head and led off to die, but we do not see Jesus’ face described or hear his voice. Jesus is not the grammatical subject of any sentence in this section, objectified even in Matthew’s syntax: they take him, strip him, put a costume on him, spit on him, strike him, mock him, strip him again, and lead him away to crucify him.

Simon of Cyrene is similarly objectified. The soldiers compel him to carry Jesus’ cross, and then Matthew returns to Jesus being done unto: the soldiers offer him wine, but Jesus declines (his first action in this passage). Here Matthew doesn’t tell us why. Does he shudder? Does he reject the wine to fulfill a prophecy? Is his body shutting down? His refusal is another silence. The soldiers resume their litany of violent transitive verbs: they crucify him, divide his clothes (stripping him again), and watch him. They always watch him.

Matthew’s Passion is all about the watchers. Matthew keeps his focus trained on spectators, on those who do to Jesus, those who stare at Jesus. In the next section, more eyes are on Jesus: passersby deride him, shake their heads at him, and yell at him. The religious leaders mock him. While in other gospels Jesus talks to the bandits crucified on his right and left, Matthew records only that even the bandits taunted him.

As Jesus dies, he breaks his Matthean silence only to say, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” His next recorded utterance isn’t even words, just a loud cry and a last breath.

The Creator cries like a trapped animal. The Word falls silent. The Maker is objectified.

A famous Greek Orthodox song about the Passion captures this reversal, the Word of Life hanging dead: “Today he who hung the land in the sea is hung on a tree. / Today thorns crown the Angel’s king. / Draped in a purple robe is he who draped the sky in clouds.”

Amid all the unanswered “why” questions, amid this horror where the first cause is reduced to a passive object, God joins us in our suffering. When we are reduced to objects, when our pain makes us feel more animal than human, when we are rattling our last breath, God is with us. Our God is not a dispassionate spectator watching our weakness like a mad scientist studying rats in a box to see what we’ll do under pressure. No, this God jumps into the box with us, even into the coffin with us. In spite of our attempts to find our hope in our own mastery and agency, God has already joined us in our greatest helplessness. For therein lies our true hope: the God who is life draws near to us even in our death, so that even death cannot take our hope away from us. When we are objectified and abused, when we are suffering and dying, Jesus does not merely watch. Our God suffers silently alongside us, never abandoning us, even in death.