

## Songs of the Cross: *Were You There?*

Darrell Buchanan, Gravelbourg Church of Christ, April 3, 2022

Most of us have sung one of Christianity's most convicting songs — with its piercing questions — without knowing anything of its context or historical reflection.

- This song, which is labelled as "Traditional" in our hymnal (*Songs of Faith and Praise*) comes from the pain and anguish of American slavery.
- So, the question that it asks is about the suffering and death of Jesus but also goes back to those who first sang its evocative words: "*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*"

The series of questions that forms the basis of the song is obviously not meant to be taken literally.

- Rather, the questions are meant to function as a form of **anamnesis**. (from the ancient Greek, "to remember").

But **anamnesis** is much more than simple mental recall of an event.

- It suggests the remembering of things from a supposed previous existence or making present an object or person from the past.
- Sometimes the term "re-actualization" has been used to indicate the force of anamnesis.

As with many slave melodies, the song presents a double, hidden message.

- The hidden message that most miss is the song's challenge to the institution of slavery, particularly to those owning and selling humans as property.
- It asks: *If you were there for this Jesus you preach about all the time, why do you enslave me?*

This is a song that asks how one can stand at the cross yet live a lie? But many do so, and it *causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.*

- The spiritual re-membered the suffering of Christ and re-actualized it to the suffering of the African American slaves, with its inherent promise of God's presence and resurrection power.

"To remember a wrongdoing is to struggle against it." (Miroslav Volf)

- Memory calls us to work for a better future.
- It forces us to stand in the world as Christians and do something to change it.

*Where you there when they crucified my Lord?*

*Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?*

- Is your solidarity with Jesus and His cross or with those who put Him on the cross?
- Do we, like the few women, stay and watch and look at what is hard to see – the evil, the hatred, and more that put Jesus on the cross?

### ***Were you there?***

The song invites us not to sing it without answering, refusing to let us forget what happened.

- We may tremble as we sing it in gratitude to the Christ who died for every one who was lashed, starved, maimed, and dehumanized.
- And in gratitude to the Christ who died for those still facing injustice, near and far, — waiting on us to respond.