

Sermon for Palm Sunday

A sermon preached at the High Mass in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on Sunday, 24 March 2024 (Palm Sunday) by The Reverend Dr George Westhaver, Principal of Pusey House

MY GOD, my God, look upon me, why hast thou forsaken me ... But thou continuest holy ... Our fathers trusted in thee, and thou didst deliver them.
PSALM 22

TODAY and this week, our attention is fixed on the all-conquering love of God. The death and resurrection of Christ is nothing less than a new creation. All our worship is a participation in this passing over from death to life. But the journey toward this love, and in this love, is a difficult journey.

We are invited to go down to the depths with Christ. MY GOD, my God, look upon me, why hast thou forsaken me...

How can the Church invite us to take up our cross and follow Christ? Isn't this a shocking invitation, and invitation to participate in suffering and death? If we stand back to consider it, this can seem like a terrible invitation. Would we invite anybody we loved or cared about to share in suffering death?

A few weeks ago, Bishop Robert Barron, an American Roman Catholic bishop and evangelist, discussed the sacrifice of Christ with the psychiatrist and public intellectual Jordan Peterson.

Responding to Bishop Barron's description of Christ's sacrifice, Jordan Peterson said this: 'The Mass is an attempt to dramatize the transformation of death and hell into play'.

What could he mean by this?

Holding these surprising words before us can help us to enter into the events of this week, to participate in them.

'The Mass is an attempt to dramatize the transformation of death and hell into play'.¹

We are invited to find in Holy Week not just an encounter with the death of Christ. Holy Week offers more than a revelation of the darker parts of ourselves and of the human mob. Rather, we are invited to find in this week a life-giving intensity of worship and celebration. Holy Week leads to - Holy Week is already - a participation in the resurrection of Christ, a participation in His conquest over death, a participation in the new creation.

First, let us remember what we do at every celebration of the Mass. The celebration of the Holy Communion is a presentation of the super-abundant life of Christ. We hear the words

¹ Jordan B. Peterson podcast, episode 431, 'The True Stories that Drive Spiritual Growth, with Bishop Barron', 14 March, 2024. Around the 60 to 65 min mark.

of God and what our Lord said and did in the words of the Bible. We re-present the Last Supper, and we re-live Christ's death on the cross in the liturgy. We do not just remember these things as having taken place in the past. We participate in a reality which is made present to us now. Christ's gift of Himself in love is not a past event; Christ's gift of Himself at the life supper and in the Holy Communion is the gift of life out of death in which we participate now.

But how could our participation in the self-giving love of the divine son be a kind of play? Here, Jordan Peterson was responding to Bishop Barron and his reflections on the idea that liturgy and worship is a kind of play.

'Play takes us out of the world of daily goals and their pressures and into a sphere free of purpose and achievement'.²

Play transcends time, and in way our liturgy is outside of time. In our worship, the eternal breaks into time, and time is drawn into the all-encompassing divine present.

Worship and liturgy is a kind of anticipation, a rehearsal where we already enjoy what we wait for. The music of the liturgy, and the prayer of our hearts, participates in the music and in the prayer of heaven.

'Worship gives us a share in heaven's mode of existence, in the world of God, and worship allows light to fall from that divine world into ours.'³

How, then, can our participation in Holy Week, in the dying and rising of Christ, transform death and hell into celebration, into worship?

Peterson's conversation with Bishop Barron can help to unlock the promise of this week. These are Peterson's words:

'An invitation to the cross is an invitation to bear the voluntary suffering of life. But more than that, [the invitation to the cross is an invitation] to will the encounter with hell itself. This is an invitation to fully confront the worst of all possible realities or potentialities.'⁴

'Hell is the worst thing possible, hell worse than death Most people who are traumatized are traumatized by the encounter with malevolence not tragedy. Malevolence or evil is purposeless bad, or worse, intentional bad'.⁵

[You cannot] 'adapt to life if you shy away from mortality and malevolence. There is no way that you can have a full adaption to life if you shy away from that shadow. Well [we may say] I cannot [do that], it would tear me to pieces and destroy me. No, if you did that voluntarily and in faith, it would destroy sin in you, it wouldn't destroy you. If you were rife with sin, [full of sin] it might feel a lot like destruction. That is a different matter.

² Benedict XVI, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, chapter 1

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jordan B. Peterson podcast, episode 431, 'The True Stories that Drive Spiritual Growth, with Bishop Barron', 14 March, 2024. His words are quoted, paraphrased and adapted. Around the 55 to 65 min mark.

⁵ 'Death and hell are exemplars of what is most unbearable. If we could transform them into play, that's the same thing as finding the pearl of the highest price, the gold that the worst possible dragon guards'.

Peterson is a psychiatrist, and he is translating the language of theology into the language of psychiatry and psychology. But he is also helping us to appreciate the significance of what Christ accomplishes for us, for all people, and for the whole of created order.

The Mass [our celebration of Holy Week], is a drama which displays the transformation of death and hell into play. The liturgy displays the transformation of suffering-in-love freely given, into worship and a celebration of the new creation in Christ.

We hear this transformation, and we choose this transformation for ourselves, when we take on our lips and in our hearts, our inner temple, the words of Psalm 22 which will echo throughout this week:

MY GOD, my God, look upon me, why hast thou forsaken me :
O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not.

In praying these words, our Lord takes on himself all of humanity's experience of lostness or forsakenness. Christ takes on himself all human rejection of God and the consequences of that rejection. But Christ is not lost or forsaken. In the words of the Psalm, the experience of lostness moves on to praise and to a confident knowledge of God's presence and power:

But thou continest holy: O thou worship of Israel.
Our fathers hoped in thee: they trusted in thee, and thou didst deliver them.

On the one hand, the words of Psalm 22 speak of Christ's betrayal, and our own sense of betrayal: 'All they that see me laugh me to scorn'. It is the experience of our most precious hopes being taken from us. And yet, 'thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts.'

How is this exchange from desolation to hope possible, how is our experience of death and evil transformed into worship?

Peterson says that if we can look at death and malevolence 'voluntarily and in faith', they do not destroy us, they destroy sin in us.

That is a good description of what we are invited to celebrate. From a human point of view, Our Lord's life is taken from Him. But that is only part of the story, and not the most important part. Before the Divine Word took on human nature, He chose to die for us. His life is not taken; He lays it down, voluntarily and in faith. The divine Son chose to give His life for us freely and in love.

So, we are invited to choose the way of the cross with Him. First, we face malevolence voluntarily when we choose to recognize all forms of unlove in our own lives. When we choose sin, we cry out, 'crucify him'. In the power of His endless life, we can face malevolence in all its forms.

Secondly, when we face mortality and suffering, we are invited to choose these things with Christ. We are invited to receive our encounter with suffering and mortality as a part of our share in His suffering for us.

We are invited to receive all forms of suffering in and with Christ.

In this way, we are never alone in our suffering. We do not make this choice on our own, but with God's help. When we come to pray together, we step into the liturgy. When we step into the liturgy, we let the life of Christ and the body of Christ carry us. When we step into the liturgy, Christ's choice, and Christ's life, orders and shapes us in love and truth and in goodness.

Even while we seek health and deliverance in the midst of suffering, for ourselves and for others, we can lay our lives down with Christ.

On the one hand, we take on His words of lament, 'My God, My God why have you forsaken me?' And that lament may be long and painful.

But in Christ who lays down His life for us, we can always say:

'But thou continest holy: Our fathers hoped in thee: they trusted in thee, and thou didst deliver them. Thou didst make me hope, when I was still upon my mother's breasts. I know that you are near me and with me.' Ps. 22

At the end of her message describing her diagnosis of cancer, Catherine, Princess of Wales concludes with a message of hope:

'I am also thinking of all those whose lives have been affected by cancer,' she said. 'For everyone facing this disease, in whatever form, please do not lose faith or hope. You are not alone.'

The Princess of Wales offers a wonderful message for Holy Week and Easter: she confronts her mortality, and she does so in hope. The follower of Jesus hears these words in their fullest sense: 'You are not alone'. It is not merely a human hope that we are not alone. The divine being-with-us embraces and completes our hope in all forms of human help. This week, we enter into the mystery of that hope.

Holy Week enacts the transformation of our encounter with death and evil into worship and celebration. We go down to the depths with Christ, and He raises us up again. This journey in the liturgy and in life leads us into real suffering, and real loss. But this gift of divine life conquers all forms of death, and sin, and evil. In Christ, we are raised up to a new life. We don't just choose with Christ as a kind of intellectual assent; we enter into liturgy as we enter into life. In Christ, all forms of suffering and death become part of our journey in the new creation, and into the reality, beauty, and power of his super-abundant life:

We cry unto thee, this week, and each day, we cry unto thee and we are delivered: we trust in thee, and we are not confounded. (Psalm 22.5, adapted)