

The Drama of Palm Sunday of the Passion

The Swiss Jesuit priest Hans Urs von Balthasar was arguably one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century. Among his many works is a collection of five volumes, entitled *Theo-Drama*. The work deals with the drama of our salvation, and focuses on Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. Balthasar argues that God is intimately concerned with the good in and for each one of us. We also have a role to play, here, almost like an actor on a stage. Salvation becomes a ‘performance’: Jesus performs in the theatre of Holy Week, during His Passion, death, and Resurrection, and we in turn are involved as performers in the way we participate in our own journeys – throughout the span of our lives – back to our heavenly homeland.

We can see this theatrical motif, and our own involvement as human beings, in the liturgy of today. The very title – Palm Sunday of the Passion – is ‘dramatic’, and the action is set out in the Gospel reading before the Entrance Procession. Here, in Matthew’s account, the drama is increased by the quotation of the Old Testament prophecy of Zechariah, who had foretold the arrival in Jerusalem of a humble king, riding a donkey. The disciples bring a donkey and colt, and they lay their cloaks on the backs of these animals. Meanwhile, crowds of people line the road, cut branches from the trees, and spread them in the path of Jesus, shouting in jubilation: “Hosanna to the Son of David!” When he enters Jerusalem, “the whole city was in turmoil”. A theatrical setting indeed.

Now fast forward to our second Gospel of this Sunday, to Matthew’s account of the Passion, the highpoint of today’s Liturgy of the Word. As the first Gospel describes Jesus’ triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, so this one describes his ignominious exit. As the first is life-giving and joyful, so the second ends in death and shame. As Jesus enters the city on a donkey, so he becomes the beast of burden, shouldering the weight of the cross on his back. As cloaks were laid on the back of the donkey in the first Gospel account, so now Jesus is stripped and made to wear a scarlet cloak; no more is he seen as the much-anticipated king foretold by Zechariah, but a figure of fun, with a crown of thorns on his head, and a reed in his right hand. The jubilant cries of “Hosanna” are replaced with “Hail, King of the Jews”. The branches cut from trees are replaced with the reed that is used to strike him on the head.

The rejoicing crowds lining the road into Jerusalem have become a baying mob, ridiculing him and crying out for his blood. Within the space of a week, the whole city is in turmoil once again.

The importance of ‘staging’ is evident in the various evocative locations where we encounter our Lord during this most holy of weeks: in Bethany, at dinner in the house of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, where the feet of Jesus are anointed with pure nard (Gospel on Monday of Holy Week); in the Upper Room, during the fateful Last Supper (Tuesday); at a gathering of the chief priests, where Judas is given his thirty pieces of silver (Wednesday); at table, where Jesus washes the feet of his closest disciples (Holy Thursday); in the stillness of the Garden of Gethsemane; at the houses of the priests Annas and Caiaphas; in the Praetorium with Pontius Pilate; on the noisy, crowd-filled streets of Jerusalem; and finally – outside the city walls – to Mount Calvary, and the place of execution of the Christ (Friday). Each location is poignant, each one like a theatre setting. On Saturday, we remain ‘at the tomb’, watching – waiting – praying, for the glory that is the Resurrection. What a wonderful climax indeed!
Exsultate jubilate!

What of the other ‘actors’ in this drama? Here, amongst the cast of characters, we have human nature on display in all its magnificence and depravity. Almost every human emotion and character type is portrayed: the sincerity, but weakness, of Simon Peter, leading to his sorrow and contrition (captured with such poignancy in Bach’s ‘Erbarme Dich’, from his magnificent *St. Matthew Passion*); the desperate treachery of Judas, which ends in despair and death; the calculating vacillation and cynical compromising of Pontius Pilate; the envy and hatred of Caiaphas and Annas; the terrified cowering of the disciples; the helping hands of Simon of Cyrene; the brutality of the Roman executioners; the enlightened comprehension of the Centurion; the utter grief and desolation of Mary the mother of Jesus; the kindness of Joseph of Arimathea. Amidst all of this maelstrom, there is the principal actor, Jesus the Christ, the anointed one, who accepts his destiny meekly like a lamb led to the slaughter, ever obedient to the will of the Father.

Where do we fit in all of this? What role do we play in this drama? As human beings, we each have the capacity to display these different emotions. With whom do we identify

ourselves? Do we see ourselves as a Simon Peter: well-meaning, but hesitant and lukewarm in our faith? Are we like one of the other fearful disciples, who abandon Jesus at the first sign of challenge or trouble? Are we envious, or do we carry a grudge against others? Do we compromise, and seek the easier option, failing to stand up for what we know is right? Are we grieving for the loss of a loved one? During the rest of this Passion Sunday, and for the remainder of Holy Week, let's try to reflect on this drama of our salvation; let's identify ourselves in the emotions of the 'actors'; let's imagine how we would have acted, and what we would have said, if we had been there. Would we have defended the Christ? Walked the royal path of the Cross with Him? Turned our backs on Him, frightened for our own lives? Would we have journeyed to the foot of Calvary, close to Mary, our Blessed Mother?

Let's close the curtain of this drama of our salvation – for the moment – with the following words of the-then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger: “The fact that the Son of God took all this upon himself in exemplary manner, as the ‘Lamb of God’, is bound to make us shudder at the cruelty of man, on one hand, and make us think carefully about ourselves, how far we are willing to stand by as cowardly or silent onlookers, or how far we share responsibility ourselves. On the other side, it is bound to transform us and to make us rejoice in God. He has put himself on the side of the innocent and the suffering”.

(God and the World: A Conversation with Peter Seewald (Ignatius Press, 2002), p. 333)