

Undergoing Paschal Mystery

a sermon preached on

Passion Sunday of Palms

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lections: Luke 19:28-40, Luke 22:14-23:56

Holy Week offers us the greatest of spiritual resources. But, as with all things religious, these spiritual resources are at great risk of being thwarted even by we who practice them. This is the strange paradox of institutional religion. We forget that religion, and all religious rituals and dogmas, are the products of raw encounter with the Divine – not the other way around! Because of this forgetting, the keeping of religious practices, especially within the context of a religious institution, readily supplants the fearful demands of Divine encounter with the apparent safety of religious ideas and rituals and institutional life. That is precisely the warning of all the great prophets of Israel – a warning echoed again and again by Jesus.

To reiterate, but more bluntly, the nub of the matter in Holy Week is this. Holy Week is of no earthly use if it merely confirms our acceptance of certain historical statements and propositions – no matter how important these may seem to be to us. The point of the Paschal Mystery is not to accept it as an idea to be defended. And certainly not to simply support a religious institution and its many requirements. Rather, the point is to do it, to undergo it ourselves. The Pascha is to be undergone. We, too, must go the same way as the Christ. I am not exempt. I dare not merely talk *about* Christ. What use is it to us, to paraphrase Meister Eckhart, if Christ is crucified and rises, if we also do not undergo the same crucifixion and resurrection? Everything we hear and do this week is only of any use if it supports each of us in the task of undergoing the Christ way.

And what is the Christ way? In a nutshell, it is this. The Christ resists the regressive forces of the collective, the crowd. The collective wants him to be their king, to conquer Rome. Christ resists all such attempts. Crowds always seek the mirage of the assurance of numbers, the sense that if I am with lots of others I must be on the right track – as today's 'Hosannas' poignantly illustrate. Christ resists such false assurance. Crowds imagine that the world can be changed by getting a whole mob of people together. Christ resists this logic, walking alone to Golgotha. Crowds want someone else to do for them what individuals ought to do for themselves. Christ resists this infantile urge, and tells them that they too must take up a cross and do what he does.

Such resistance to the mentality of the collective – including the collective we call Church - is the very essence of the Paschal Mystery. Because the collective is unconscious. The collective, including the church collective, is asleep. The collective is regressive, always looking backwards in an attempt to recreate an imagined garden of Eden – albeit recreated as a future cloud in the sky. The Christ reveals that only an individual who is sufficiently conscious is able to resist the regressive unconsciousness of the collective – and thus give birth to something truly new.

Furthermore, this is only possible via the apparent annihilation of the individual ego, in a terrifying encounter with the complete absence of meaning and existence – which in the imagery of our tradition is Good Friday and Holy Saturday. It hardly needs to be pointed out that the price required is the highest price there is! That's the Paschal Mystery: "Those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will find their life / soul $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$ *psyche*." ¹

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Luke 8:24

It should be abundantly clear that the difference between actually undergoing the Paschal Mystery and between 'believing in' certain historical and dogmatic propositions and belonging to 'a church' is like cheese and chalk. Believing in historical and dogmatic propositions actually costs very little, if anything at all.

But doing it, undergoing the Pascha, costs not less than everything. It may cost our reputation, our work, our identity, our friends. It may require us to let go of the one thing we feel we cannot. It will certainly require us to face the one deepest and darkest part of ourselves which we have refused to own, and which we have projected onto others. It may require us to take a stand against some things, and for some other things, a stand that could have the effect of completely rearranging our life and our relationships. It may even require us to let go of the faith which has sustained us this far.

I dare not merely talk about these things. Like you, I must undergo this also. I, too, must consciously and willingly descend into the grave with Christ, into the Nothing, the Abyss in which in fact all life is generated, but which can just as readily overwhelm us. From the point of view of ego consciousness, this is without doubt a death.

That is the cost of following Christ. Not rational belief in historical or dogmatic propositions or institutional life, but actually dying that we may rise. The purpose of Holy Week and the sacred Easter Triduum is to support that momentous undergoing – in whatever particular form it might take for each of us.

May Christ be our companion in this great undergoing – that we may not have fear but live in the hope of the Paschal Mystery.

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