

## **Palm Sunday 2023**

The old ones are the best, they say, and so with that in mind I ask you a question: what is the difference between a liturgist and a terrorist? Answer: you can negotiate with a terrorist. This joke is actually unfair. A frequent misunderstanding which flourishes in churches is the assumption that ceremony and liturgy are one and the same. The intransigent target of my joke should be a ceremonialist, one who is concerned with exactly who does what, when, and how during divine service. Ceremony contributes to liturgy, but it does not constitute it. Liturgy is the worship of the people of God, it is a theological concept, not a set of choreographic regulations. If we have to place liturgy in any sort of explanatory context, it is helpful to think of it not as ceremony, but as drama, and at no point do we see this more clearly than during Holy Week.

A play is, in many ways, an idea. It is hard to say exactly what makes a play what it is. Last week's sermon began with the final line of "Hamlet", and the play "Hamlet" is constituted not just by the text, or in the case of Hamlet, the three different versions of the text, but by all the differing interpretations of that text which have been staged, filmed, recorded, and written down over the centuries. If I were on a desert island and

had never heard of Hamlet, then being presented with the text would not give me anything like the knowledge or experience of the play which someone who had seen many productions would have. Hamlet, of course, is famous for its many soliloquies, and one of the purposes of a soliloquy is to enact what came to be called the alienation of the audience: breaking off from the action reminds us that we are watching something which is somehow unreal, something acted – it is a reminder which twentieth century drama was often determined to emphasise.

The church's dramatic actions are similar to a play in that they have common texts and hence a common plot, but they are variously performed. Liturgical texts are texts in performance, and one performance may be very different from another. What a text says, and what we do with that text, are two different things: their combination gives the text meaning. That is why we should not shy away from the problems which historical texts present, or sanitise them in the hope that those problems may disappear. Instead we engage the text now, and let it find a contemporary voice. No-one now performing *The Merchant of Venice* is likely to find the central narrative of Jewish-Christian conflict in any way laudable. The text of Matthew's passion narrative may feature the people of Jerusalem saying the words "His blood be upon us and upon our children", but to take that as a licence

for persecution of Jews, as did previous generations, is an interpretation so offensive as to be blasphemous.

God's theatre is human history, and the events of human history are the dramatic cycle which we call creation. At the centre of this cycle stand the events of this week. Once a year we come together fully to enact the dramatic events which tell the truth of our creation, our redemption and our resurrection in Christ. In miniature we enact these events every day in every single celebration of the eucharist, but here and now we have come to perform our passion play, to stage another production of the meaning of our lives.

Human beings are never off God's stage. We are, in that sense, cast in a narrative from which we cannot escape, moving inexorably towards death as surely as any tragic hero. More specifically, our lives are never free of the events of his week. Human beings have no existence apart from the drama which God has chosen to create, and hence their existence can never be understood apart from the climax of that drama, the events which alone give meaning to the mysteries which we call life, love, death and salvation.

However, there is a very important difference between liturgical and theatrical drama. A play is acted. Liturgy is enacted. In walking the way of the cross with our fellow Christians this Holy Week, we are not pretending to do something which is not real, we are not acting, in that we are not temporarily being something which we in fact are not. This is not something which happens to others. It happens to me and it happens to you.

There is one rather disturbing consequence of this fact, and at the beginning of Holy Week it is this: you and I are in the crowds welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem, and you and I will be in the crowds baying for his death on Good Friday. You and I are able to follow Jesus to the cross only because we first drove him to it, because we condemned him to death, we forced those thorns into his forehead, we lashed the skin from his back, we drove the nails into his wrist. We sent the Son of God to his death upon the cross. This Holy Week we have the chance to do it again. And once again, this Holy Week, we have the chance to watch him forgive us.