

Celebrating Palm Sunday with Matthew's passion narrative

Thomas O'Loughlin

Twice each year, on Palm Sunday and Good Friday, the reading of the gospel becomes visibly a liturgical event in its own right. On these occasions the dramatic reading with several voices may replace the solitary tone of the deacon/priest. Yet in most parishes this is not only a missed opportunity to do something which can enhance the whole celebration, but can become something counter productive to good communication. At the very least it can become a shambles of voices coming in off-cue, lines-lost, or confused mumbling (“Whose line is it?” “Whose that voice supposed to represent?”). At worst it can send hidden signals to the congregation about how we view the passion, the Jews, and the ministry of proclamation.

Involvement

The traditional format of using several voices to read the Passion has much to recommend it: the unusual style picks out this reading as special; and given that the Passion on Palm Sunday is the longest Sunday reading of the year, the variety of voices makes the story easier to follow and less monotonous. However, some points should be noted about reading it in this way. First, if people are ‘following it’ in booklets, then they are not listening but engaged in kind of semi-reading / semi-listening that has the disadvantages of both activities, without the particular benefit of either. So we should dispense with the sheets and let the whole story be listened to: listening to the sacred stories is a primary liturgical action. Being without booklets has other advantages. First, the periodic rumble as people turn pages is removed; and second, the congregation are not watching out for their ‘bits’ when they join in as the various ‘crowds’ and instead of a clear shout “Crucify him! Crucify him” we get a ragged volley of voices that just makes noise. The ‘crowd’ parts are best done by a

specific chorus who come in on cue and together.

This suggestion may seem to fly in the face of the praiseworthy desire to involve people in the liturgy: giving the congregation 'some lines' seems to 'get them doing something,' however, while giving everyone 'something to do' is the correct strategy in running a school concert, when applied to these readings it fails to grasp the essential dynamics of the event. Story telling is a linear process by which one group reveals the tale to another part of the group who act as the audience: the involvement of the audience is they listen and provide an audience for the tale. Cultural anthropologists looking at sacred narratives and cycles of mythology make a crucial distinction between the 'active transmitters' (the storytellers) and those who already know the tale ('passive transmitters') occasioned by their presence at this recital of the sacred events.

Three voices?

In liturgical books the Passion is still set out in three voices (N[arrator], J[esus], O[ther]) and a C[horus]. This is simply a small development of the older three-voice model of *Christus*, *Synagoga*, and *Narrator*. That in turn was a product of the tridentine High Mass liturgy of the priest, deacon, and subdeacon as the only lectors. This three-voice model is, apart from being a hangover from the legal concerns of a now abandoned rite, quite useless: in a media-conscious age, there must be as many voices as characters - imagine a radio soap like 'The Archers' with just three voices! However, there is a far more serious problem with just using three voices whereby, unintentionally, a perverse message is sent to the congregation: when the 'other voices' are lumped together (i.e. the *synagoga*) this is based on a dated theology of the Passion as Christ-versus-the Jews (referred to as 'the synagogue'). In this the Christ is represented as the one who suffers because of the Synagogue, while the narrator is the neutral observer. All that is linked to his suffering and death is

thereby brought together and laid at the foot of the Jews.

Anti-semitism

We can see part of the thinking beneath the three-voice reading of the Passion by noting the significance of naming one of the voices '*synagoga*' -- 'the synagogue.' The word has a wholly negative connotation in the Latin tradition: in exegesis and preaching throughout the Middle Ages it was used to represent all that was opposed to Christianity and all those who willfully rejected the truth. When this many-voice reading of the Passion emerged in the liturgy, the choice of the name *synagoga* for all the speaking parts was an obvious one. We have removed this anti-semitism from our commentaries and preaching, and the reference to the 'perfidious Jews' may be gone from the Good Friday prayers, but as long as we use just one other voice alongside that of Christ, then we actually send the signal that it is that voice versus Christ, and perpetuate a view of the Passion that Vatican II formally rejected. The 'Jews crucifying Christ' is theologically unacceptable, and we must be wary of sending-out unconscious signals in the liturgy such as that the passion is the 'goody against the baddies.'

Women's Voices

One of the developments in political society that has not yet found its full place in the way many think liturgically is that 'we choose our own representatives.' In ordinary society we no longer say - nor would we accept - 'they will speak for you.' Giving a voice to the voiceless is now seen as a moral action, while suppressing voice is seen as deceitful and wrong - and the Catholic Church is often presented as a culprit. This shift in culture has implications for liturgy.

We appreciate that 'each voice must be heard' and must be allowed to choose its own representatives. What is of interest

here is that we use the metaphor of 'voice': each group must have its 'voice', each particular 'voice' must be heard, no 'voice' must be smothered. If this is part of our reality - and it is - then what message do we send out when the voices of women in the gospels are then taken by a male voice in this reading? It is one thing when the story is read by a single voice, then any distinction of voices is impossible: indeed the single voice becomes that of the narrator and direct speech is presented as quotations. It is quite another matter when the narrator becomes a separate person and the text is acted out with distinct voices: now for a woman's voice to represent a man, or a man's voice to represent a woman, sends out a message of sexual imperialism. If distinctive voices are going to be heard in the Passion, then each voice must be gendered correctly.

One might deride this idea that the reading voice should be of the same gender as the person whose words are being read with a *reductio ad absurdum* like this: if a woman should read a female part, then only a soldier could read a soldier's part, a Galilean that of a Galilean. However, this retort misses the whole point of the liturgical reading of scripture. We read the text that the tradition delivers to us; we do not try to have an historical reconstruction. Liturgy is anamnesis not mime! If we chose to dramatise the Passion, or any other text (e.g. *Hamlet*) then we need those who can recreate the text for us in sound: we need a male for Peter and for Polonius; a female for Mary Magdalen and Ophelia. We do not need a Galilean nor a Danish crown prince; but, equally, we no longer use boys to play the female parts in Shakespeare. When three clergy read the Passion, or any male voice reads the parts that belong to women in the text we are suppressing a female voice in the liturgy, and sending out a sub-verbal message: women's voices do not really register in the gospel as we understand it. Or, put literally: 'women have no voice in the gospel.'

Dramatis personae

So how many voices should one use?

To read Matthew 26:14 - 27:66 requires:

- (1) Main narrator (Male [M] or Female [F] voice);
- (2) Second narrator for prophesy embedded in the narration, i.e. Jeremiah at 27:9, (M);
- (3) Jesus (M);
- (4) Peter (M);
- (5) Judas Iscariot (M);
- (6) Accuser before Chief Priests (M);
- (7) High Priest (M);
- (8) Servant girl #1 (F);
- (9) Servant girl #2 (F);
- (10) Pilate (M);
- (11) Pilate's wife (F);
- (12) Centurion (M);
- (13) Disciples of Jesus (some male voices);
- (14) Sanhedrin / Chief Priests / Scribes (some male voices);
- (15) Bystanders at High Priest's house (some mixed voices);
- (16) Group of soldiers (many male voices);
- (17) Crowd outside Pilate's house and at the cross (many mixed voices); and
- (18) Mocking passers-by at 27:40 (best if some female voices read this to make a contrast with the male voices of the Chief Priests at 27:42).

Obviously the chorus can combine and recombine for the group voices – or it can be a special group located apart.

The Presider's Task

Many presbyters - allowing that it is still rare to have a deacon - believe that the voice of Jesus is still reserved to them; however, since 1970 this is not the case. The current rubrics simply state that 'the part of Christ [is], if possible, reserved to a priest.' This permission should be exploited to the full: let the Passion be read entirely by a group who have practiced for this particular

ministry and let the presider - who may already read the gospel at the entrance on Palm Sunday - stand aside. When a presbyter does join in it sends a signal that he is the 'real' reader with some second-rate assistants for 'the big day.' Is this message compatible with Lk 22:24-7? Moreover, in the presider being vested while the others are not, it presents an unevenness in the visual effect of the narrative that is distracting and makes too big a contrast between his words and the rest of the story. This can invoke the older image of Jesus and his persecutors.

In the final analysis, there is a practical reason why the presider should stand aside. Given that more often than not there is only one 'sacred minister' at any of these liturgies, most priests find themselves more than busy in Holy Week. The multiplicity of jobs means that liturgy is often poorly prepared with the genuine excuse that there was not enough time to get it all done properly. Preparing the Passion to be read well by several voices is time consuming and needs careful practice and he should hand it over to others who do have the time to prepare it carefully and thus execute this focal point in the whole of the annual narration of the gospel with the care it deserves.

Lastly, just as one can creatively use sound to make this proclamation an event, so to you can use location - the liturgy was the original 'theatre in the round' - but this so depends on the building's shape that only the people on the spot can address it. But thinking out the story in terms of space and movement can be an opportunity for genuine local creativity.