

Palm Sunday 2019
Fr Jonathan Jong

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Let it be granted that Christians were few in number at the beginning”¹. This is hardly an unreasonable assumption. Even if we take at face value the biblical claims that Jesus sometimes had audiences in the thousands, and that he entered Jerusalem to great fanfare, the subsequent events will have changed things dramatically. He will soon be abandoned in the darkness. Some will return, thanks in part to Mary Magdalen’s news of the empty tomb: just before Pentecost, the Book of Acts tells us, the disciples numbered just 120.

About 280 years later, the Emperor Constantine issues the Edict of Milan, providing Christianity with legal protection. It was, I am sure, very nice of him to have done so, but it was also likely a savvy political move: historians estimate that by the beginning of the fourth century, there were about six million Christians in the Roman Empire, about 10% of the population. Numbers

¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III.10.

continue swelling in the next few decades—the time of the Church Fathers: Athanasius and Augustine, Cyril and Basil, the two Gregories, Fr Jarred’s beloved Hilary—and in the year 380, Christianity becomes the state religion of the Roman Empire under Theodosius I. In under 350 years, we went from a minor Jewish messianic cult to the imperial religion of the world’s greatest superpower.

Many people think of the growth of early Christianity as remarkable, and many scholars have indeed remarked upon it, in their various attempts to account for the thing. Edward Gibbon’s hypotheses are perhaps the best known: he thought that Christianity flourished because of its intolerance (compared to paganism), its promise of everlasting life, its association with miracles, its lofty morality, and the disciplined solidarity of the early Church.

These days, statistically-inclined historians are a little less impressed by the early growth of Christianity, pointing out that it is no so unique as to be miraculous. They observe, for example, that the numerical growth indicates a growth rate of about 3.5% per year: this is slower than the growth of Mormonism across the 20th

century, and the rise of Afro-Brazilian spiritism in recent decades.

I don't know if I am quite as *blasé* as my colleagues, but there is perhaps something more remarkable than the Church's growth before Constantine, and that the Church's *survival* after. It is remarkable not on sociological grounds—it makes perfect sense from that perspective—but on theological ones: how did the Church not crumble under the weight of the contradiction between her gospel and her newfound imperial entanglements?

Something like this question isn't new, though people put it the other way around, asking whether the Roman Empire suffered from its Christian commitments. After all, an empire—or, for that matter, a modern nation-state—surely cannot be built on an ethic of turning the other cheek, of offering tunic as well as cloak, of selling all possessions for the sake of the poor. Even in Augustine's time, people wondered about whether Christian values were to blame for Rome's decay: Augustine's initial response to the question was disappointingly mealy-mouthed², compared to his later take-down of empire in *City of*

² <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102138.htm>

God: there, he observes that empires begin with transgression and expand with violence. Christian citizens of empire—even of ostensibly Christian empires—are necessarily also foreigners, exiled in their own land.

None of this is to ask what the Romans have ever done for us. Or, for that matter, what the British Empire has ever done for the world. The moral calculus is not about weighing the benefits of roads and schools against the slaughter of Sea Dayaks in Borneo. Christian moral analysis has less to do with effects than causes: it is imperial *desire*—the desire for domination, possession, and glory—that is the problem, that is the crux of its contradiction with Christian faith. Or, if you like, it is how imperial forces understand power, possession, and glory that is at fault. To the extent that power is correlated with violence, possession with inequality, and glory with vanity, the pursuit of these cannot be reconciled with Christianity, whose founder's words and deeds are too emphatic to require much sophisticated exposition.

It is the beginning of Holy Week, and this week of all weeks it is impossible not to confront the contradictions between the kingdom of God and the

earthly empires which we inhabit. Or, put another way: it is impossible this week not to consider what the gospel is that we preach—that spread so rapidly in those early decades—and whether we have betrayed it, and what it might look like to live according to it.

Palm Sunday is only the beginning: but the farce of imperial glory hardly ends with this peasant's procession on an ass. He will soon be crowned and robed too. He will soon be lifted high, and thrice acclaimed as king. These scenes cannot leave us unchanged, cannot leave unchanged how we view all displays of power, possession, and glory, all crowns and sceptres, all coronations and royal weddings. We are—the Church of England is—still an imperial religion: the legacy of Constantine and Theodosius is ours to the extent that Elizabeth is ours, and we are not exempt from asking how that could possibly work, when our God's crown is thorns, his throne a cross.

Nor do our contradictions end at the gates of Buckingham Palace. Power, possession, and glory are not only affairs of state, but also fundamental elements of our personal and professional lives. How we treat others, particularly the powerless; how we spend our money, or hoard it; what our motivations

are in all our doings—are all opportunities to take the gospel seriously, or not.

This Holy Week, as every Holy Week, is an opportunity to ponder these things: to recall the ways we have abandoned Christ as his disciples did in the Garden; to remember that we have been crucified with Christ on Good Friday; to rejoice that our dying in him frees us to live with him new lives, lives as Easter people in the Kingdom of God. So, let's get started.

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