

Palm Sunday, 25th March 2018

There is really not very much you can add after hearing the Passion, you might be glad to hear! Silence and reflection are better than a torrent of perhaps superfluous words. Hopefully, you will find some time this week to quietly think and pray over the Passion that we have just heard, and maybe not only reading the text of the Gospel but also listening to some musical setting of it, so as to make up for the lack of one at this Mass!

Last Holy Week, for example, I made a point of listening to the entire Bach *St Matthew Passion*. It is of course based on today's Passion reading, from St Matthew's Gospel, though with a bit more at the beginning, including the Last Supper. I also listened to the whole of his *St John Passion*, which is read (or sung even) on Good Friday. There is the difference, not the obvious and oversimplistic one that our liturgical performance of the Passion is Catholic and the pieces by Bach are Lutheran and therefore Protestant, but the fact that a series of chorales and arias have been inserted into the librettos of these two great oratorios of Baroque music.

Not only do the choruses and solos help to break up the slight monotony of the recitative of the Evangelist, the narrator, but they more importantly help us to meditate upon the individual episodes, indeed the drama, of the Passion narrative. And surely what is more dramatic than the Passion of our Lord? This is touchingly demonstrated by perhaps the most famous aria from the *St Matthew Passion*, "*Erbarme dich*" (better sung by a countertenor than a female alto; that is just my opinion, though you probably agree that there is something ethereal about the countertenor voice).

The aria comes immediately after St Peter has denied his Lord for the third time, the cock has crowed, "And going forth, he wept bitterly" (Mt 26:75). The text of "*Erbarme dich* (Have mercy)" appropriately concludes in the same way: "*bitterlich* (bitterly)", but then quickly gets absorbed into the continuous and deeply moving plea for God's mercy. Should we not also do likewise for our own sins, the cause of Christ's Passion? And we do not just invoke the Divine Mercy, when tears may happen to flow: we trust in Him.