

When in doubt, choose faith

The great classical and modern art of Christianity furthers the drama of the Easter story and galvanises our wavering belief

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When we look back on the civilisation we have inherited, the centrality of the story that Christianity enacts is unmistakeable. We eat our hot-cross buns, we gulp down our humble fish and chips on Good Friday, and if we stick to tradition we leave the Easter eggs and the orgy of chocolate gormandising to Easter Sunday.

Our different calendars are out of synch — the beautiful Orthodox Easter happens later, and this year it is even later still, next month. But everyone in the Christian tradition says to whoever they meet on Easter Sunday, “Christ is risen,” and everyone replies, “He is risen indeed.”

Before this, though, is one hell of a lead-up through the events of Holy Week.

Starting with the crowd strewing Christ’s way on Palm Sunday (now called Passion

Sunday), through the stark drama of Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane (where he accepts the cup of suffering, which will not pass by without his drinking it) and his interrogations by the high priest and Pontius Pilate, to his death on the cross. The Holy Week cycle will culminate in the resurrection, Christ rising from the dead and coming out of the tomb.

Each Holy Week milestone makes up the story that has been told a thousand ways in painting, sculpture, music and film. Each moment has its own drama and resonance with our modern-day sorrows and joys, our doubts and objections and tenuous faith.

The Easter story is a distinct influence on one of Shakespeare's greatest late plays, *The Winter's Tale*. If you believe in the truth of art and its moral power (in the way that great critic and greater novelist Henry James did), then the Easter story is difficult to get away from.

This is Maundy Thursday, Holy Thursday. The night of the biblical Last Supper and the first Eucharist, when Jesus took the bread and wine and said they were his body and blood, instituting the world's first communion.

He is in the upper room with his disciples partaking of the paschal meal. From the Gospel according to St Matthew: "And as they did eat, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it, and gave to them, and said, 'Take, eat: this is my body'. And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them: and they all drank of it. And he said unto them, 'This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many'."

This year the church is concentrating on St Mark for its scriptural readings of Holy Week until Good Friday (which is always dominated by the Passion of St John and "a God who would wipe away all tears".)

Mark's Gospel was the one that made Nick Cave interested in Christianity, not least because it's the shortest. If you want an easy way into the whole of Mark's Gospel, have a look on YouTube at the dazzling one-man show the superb English actor Alec McCowen did of it.

The Last Supper story is extraordinary because two things are happening at once. The grandeur of Leonardo da Vinci's half-ruined masterpiece, painted on the wall of the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, indicates the absolute serenity and supremacy of Jesus while making clear all the declamation and gesticulation of this group of disciples, one of whom, Jesus says, will betray him. Leonardo captures both the turbulent drama and the encircling stillness.

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Good Friday is the dark night of the soul — the day when no mass is celebrated because it's the day Christ died on the cross so the world would be forgiven its sins.

One of the most striking things about the Easter cycle is its tragicomic complexity. At every point we are aware of the divinity of Christ, the greatest of the prophets who is also more than a prophet, and of the suffering figure driven to his death.

The historical Jesus was steeped in the exalted, often sorrowful language of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not ... All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

But the other way of seeing this is that Isaiah saw into the future and saw Jesus.

One of the greatest pieces of short fiction written in this country was composed by Pierre Ryckmans, the great Sinologist who wrote under the name Simon Leys. His main character is a madman who thinks he's Napoleon ("and besides he was Napoleon"). Was Jesus a madman who thought he was the Messiah? ("And besides he was the Messiah.")

The story of Jesus dying for the sins of the world, the story of the second person of the blessed Trinity taking human form, being absolutely a human being in order to

die most terribly and suffer the hellishness of what looked like despair, is the most profound story we know.

What does the world in which we live today believe of this long-ago story, which seems to have dovetailed neatly with a fertility cult, with Mithraism, with all that Jewish poetry of premonition?

On the evidence of the culture that we swear by, we believe more than we are willing to admit. It underpins the greatest poem of the Middle Ages, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with its sense of the love that moves the sun and the other stars.

Of course Bach took the *St. Matthew Passion* and turned it into a thing of wonder — or of further wonder — by building the sense of sublimity and of a triumph over the desolation depicted in the way he animates and transfigures those Lutheran chorales, and all that dramatic schematising of the narrative.

The Otto Klemperer version with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau as Jesus, Peter Pears as the Evangelist and the sublime voices of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Christa Ludwig singing those hymns of sorrow and tribulation has a staggering authority even though it is in no way fashionable.

Klemperer was always accused of making everything sound like Beethoven and his *St. Matthew Passion* has a weight and pace that concedes nothing to contemporary notions of the baroque yet it sounds like the thing itself: it sounds like a supreme musician, bringing to life the genius of a supreme composer as he contemplates, then animates, the most extraordinary of stories.

Pier Paolo Pasolini in the mid-1960s dedicated his *Gospel According to St. Matthew* to Pope John XXIII and his approach was opposite to Bach. He disdained technique, and with cameras wobbling and using amateur, perhaps peasant, actors he simply took all the words Jesus said in Matthew's Gospel and hurled them at the spectator like fire. The effect, a little incredibly, is a bit like a neorealist documentary of the life of Christ. The film, like Bach's *Passion*, is a masterpiece in honour of something that is more than a masterpiece.

It is worlds away even from the finest sequence in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, the raising of Lazarus, which was directed anonymously by the great David Lean. The Jesus of that film was much the greatest of all the actors to play that role, Max von Sydow, who acts like an archangel in all those masterpieces by Ingmar Bergman.

Franco Zeffirelli's Jesus of Nazareth has its points, and then there's Mel Gibson's [The Passion of the Christ](#), which has great power, if not glory, and is filmed in reconstructed Aramaic for God's sake.

But part of the uncanniness of Easter, the way it can make us feel that God has died, the way it can make us feel that he has risen indeed, that the sap of life ascends, is the way all of this seems implicit in scripture itself.

On Good Friday people flock to the cathedrals, to St Mary's and St Patrick's, St Paul's and St Andrew's, to the Uniting churches, to the Scots and Lutheran churches, the Hillsong gatherings, to see something that is almost the opposite of a ritual that culminates indeed in the stripping of the altars, a day when communion can be received but on which no host is consecrated because at three in the afternoon this disparate crowd seeks to remember the hour Christ died.

Bach not only set the St Matthew Passion, he also set St John's — some people think with greater speed and dramatic concentration — and it is the St John Passion that is read and sometimes chanted in plainchant, or Gregorian chant, on Good Friday.

Remember the great exchange with Pilate? “Then Pilate ... called Jesus, and said unto him, ‘Art thou the King of the Jews?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?’ Pilate answered, ‘Am I a Jew?’ ... Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world ... Pilate therefore said unto him, ‘Art thou a king then?’ Jesus answered, “Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.’ Pilate saith unto him, ‘What is truth?’ ...”

Pilate says *Ecce homo* (Behold the man) and when the high priests want him to modify what he has written above Jesus' cross he says, *Quod scripsi, scripsi*. (What I

have written I have written.) He is patrician, mistrustful, worried, and he is a master of the one-liner.

There is more to John's Gospel, though, and it feeds into our sense of the greatness of the art that rose to the challenge of this material. Mary, the mother of Jesus, and John, the disciple who rests her head on Jesus' breast, stands before the cross and Jesus says: "Woman, behold thy son ... Behold thy mother." This is a touch of intimacy in the vicinity of the woman the church will know as Our Lady, the great mother of God.

The overpowering grief is depicted as well as the sense of grace perfected in stone, in Michelangelo's Pieta as Mary holds the dead body of her son.

It's the other Mary, Mary Magdalene, who finds the tomb empty on the Sunday and a figure all in white tells her, "He is gone."

Then the woman of whom Jesus said that much was forgiven her because she loved much, meets him and for a moment doesn't recognise him. Though when she does she says, "Rabboni" (master).

In the song from Jesus Christ Superstar she says she doesn't know how to love him but she does better than most people. So does the thief crucified beside Christ who says to him, "Remember me when you come into your Kingdom." And Jesus replies, "I tell you this night you will be with me in paradise." St Paul, the man some people say invented Christianity, could see the problem of resurrection. On the one hand he said, "If Christ be not risen our faith is in vain" but he also declared it "a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the gentiles".

Remember doubting Thomas, who said he couldn't believe a word of it until he put his hands in the wounds? And remember his prayer? "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief." Many people in the vicinity of the art of Easter fill with wonder. How many people listening to Mozart's Requiem or looking into the face of Piero della Francesca's Risen Christ have felt doubts about their unbelief?