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Superstar Yesterday, today and tonight

Abstract
Jee-sus Christ Jee-sus Christ Who are you? What have you sacrificed?

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Superstar
Yesterday, today and tonight

Jee-sus Christ
Jee-sus Christ
Who are you?
What have you sacrificed?

I’m going home on the 5.35 train after work and I can hear it again. The music, I mean, ‘with the full orchestra, as it was at the State Theatre last night. With the full orchestra it’s great – the slow, surging swell of the phrases, the pauses. You put the words in yourself, automatically, of course.

I’m fine now, but at lunch time I was a bit depressed. The people crowded the Melbourne streets, but they might have been fishes in a bowl, moving mindlessly, mouths opening wordlessly. I could not reach them; but it was a mood I knew well and it didn’t trouble me unduly. Anyway, I was aimless myself. And the song was going around mechanically again, stuck in the same groove: Jee-sus Christ Super Star Do you think you’re what they Say you are?

At Elizabeth Street I turned left and began tossing up whether I would continue walking the two blocks to St Francis’ Church. I felt this vague need to go to the church. Insecurity? I don’t know. I thought: might as well go as not. Possibly it was a sub-conscious reaction to that episode in the pub yesterday with old Ross. Shook me up, that did. I mean, we’d been young zealots together. I’ve been thinking about it ever since.

YESTERDAY

‘I heard this doctor bloke on the radio the other night,’ he said. ‘ABC program. About 11 o’clock. He’s one of these bright Catholic laymen, you know; one of the renegade lot.’

‘Renegade? You mean: out of the Church?’

‘No; not out of the church.’

‘You mean rebel, then?’
'All right. A rebel. Anyway, he talked a lot of clever stuff and it was all bloody nonsense. Smarmy bloody nonsense.'

We put our glasses down.

'You’re probably right,' I said. 'You know, there’s many a nun in a Carmelite convent who could teach these intellectual Catholics the facts about spirituality. Confidently, I mean; knowing what she’s talking about.'

We drank again, each forming his own thoughts I not being sure how he would present his – if at all.

Then he said it.

'You know, I’ve no regrets about not being a Catholic any more. In fact, I don’t care if I even talk about it. I left the Church because I’ve got to be absolutely honest with myself. Maybe I’m neurotic about being honest with myself. Anyway, I’m confirmed in my position every time I listen to these smarmy Christians.'

He looked at me and smiled, waiting for a reaction: so I tried to keep cool; I knew I was getting worked up.

'This is no good,' I said, 'we’re just arguing with bloody adjectives.'

He laughed. 'Yes; with bloody adjectives.'

There was another pause.

'You know,' I said, 'Chesterton was right about one thing.'

'Chesterton! Chesterton was a child.'

'Chesterton,' I persisted, 'said some people can see a pattern as black on white but find it impossible to see the pattern as white on black. Like a chessboard.'

TODAY

At Bourke Street the light was green so I kept walking. I’m past 30 now and over the last 10 years, working in town, I’ve got to know St Francis’ church well. Familiar as Myers store, across the road. Similar in a sense: another market for lunchtime shoppers.

These were years of doubting. Doubts rolled up like breakers, threatening to engulf me. I always surfaced, but then new waves began to take shape. I had this compulsion to pay due heed to plausible sceptical arguments. Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt, said Newman. True enough, but then I wasn’t sure what was a difficulty and what was a doubt. Of course, the problem could have been psychological: a sort of anxiety neurosis. I picture a panel of learned academics and authors, slightly disdainful, slightly bored 'understanding' me.

A bearded scholar looks up over his glasses.

'Not a neurotic. I’d say an obsessive.'

Or is it 'intellectual misfit?' That was the opinion of Laurie Kurford, a colleague at work, as he eyed me with mild distaste in a moment of anger.
Another colleague, the lovely Moira Purnell, with the raven hair, also eyed me up and down, but more kindly.

'Don't think too much,' she said. 'That way lies madness.'

Perhaps I do think too much. But what can I do about it?

There is a passage in War and Peace when Pierre and Prince Andrew (Bolkonski) walk around the 'Bald Hills' estate having a long talk about the purpose and meaning of life, not unlike Ross and I in the pub yesterday. At one point, Bolkonski says: 'You can't help thinking. I go to bed after two in the morning, thoughts come and I can't sleep but toss about till dawn because I think and can't help thinking...'

That's me. I'm a Bolkonski. As soon as I wake up I start this conversation with myself. Often it progresses to a debate. Then to advocacy, to an address to a jury.

Also I have this rich imagination. Comes from my mother. She was a great one for 'just seeing' situations. ‘I can just see her laughing at us.’

‘I can just see him getting sloshed.’

‘I can just see him going off with that woman.’

Well, all that stuff is behind me now. Youthful faith has gone, both the elation and the anxiety - the rich emotional pleasure and the complementary bleak emptiness.

YESTERDAY

'Look,' I said to Ross, during that pub conversation, 'don't think I'm shocked about you leaving the Church. I might be disappointed, but I'm not shocked. Anyway, it's none of my damn business.'

'You're right,' he said. 'It is my business. That's something Catholics don't learn. But why disappointed?'

'All so conventional. You could have done some original thinking. Some people can doubt, you know, just as well as you.'

'Understand this,' he said. 'I'm not opposed to people believing. Probably it gives comfort. But the believer has no right poking his nose into other people's lives.'

'But he doesn't. He's ordered not to.'

'Not to judge. But he still intervenes. But as I said, I don't mind an ordinary bloke being a Catholic. Good luck to him. People need consolation. Some get it out of religion.'

'But Christianity - Catholic Christianity - isn't just any religion.'

'It is, you know. Read about the Mithraic beliefs. Read about Buddha. He was also born of a virgin with some sort of divine conception.'

TODAY

Frankly, I'm not sorry about the end of the youthful faith period. I'm no longer desperately defending, keeping an enemy without the gate.
Did I say ‘enemy’? Dear Lord, if only I had known. That was no enemy. That was sound and fury, signifying nothing. The Wizard of Oz.

Can I tell you about this vision I have? I’m in the 21st century in a tourist space craft, cruising calmly through the universe. I’m taking a walk down the top end of the centre aisle when the door to the flight deck swings open. I peek in. Nobody there! No sign of anybody. Instantly, I realize we are not going anywhere. We are just going. I look back to the passengers. All very content. Chatting, reading, drinking, sleeping. Do I tell them what I know? If I do – then what? Terror could come aboard, with havoc and chaos. It could be the ultimate horror story. I close the flight deck door and return to my seat.

I call this an unthinkable thought. There are more, but that’s another story.

Sometimes, I calmly consider the possibility that God does not exist.

‘Am I losing the Faith?’ I said to a priest in confession once.

He sighed wearily. He looked up to heaven.

‘You’re here aren’t you?’, he said, with an air of confession fatigue. ‘If you’d lost the Faith you wouldn’t be here.’

Once I thought that unless you had settled the question and put it out of your head you could not be a Catholic. Well, I don’t put it out of my head. But I take it as read on the evidence, which is damn strong. You want to hear it? Some other time. Evidence, note; not proof. Of course you can’t prove God exists. That’s a contradiction in terms. How do you prove that Existence exists?

No; my big problem was the divinity of Christ. I’ve sorted that out, too.

Jee-sus Christ
Soo-per Star
Do you think you’re what they
Say you are?

How bloody stupid, asking a question like that. Jesus said he wasn’t what they said he was. He wasn’t Elias. He wasn’t John the Baptist. Why doesn’t the Superstar mob ask themselves who they thought he was. I’ll tell you why – because they are fooling around with a caricature. Pity, that, because there’s another Christ out there and whatever he is he is not a caricature.

He is there as much as Mount Everest is there. Even if he is a fictional character he is still there, owing existence to one or more people, just as Hamlet owes his existence to Shakespeare.

You see? I’m off again. This is what I was thinking, meandering along Elizabeth Street, with the song going around on a turntable. Like a record, my mind is also revolving, thinking, debating, as it does ten thousand times a day. Amazing what you can pack into a few minutes.

Hamlet. Now there is something. A masterpiece. But consider that

But Jesus is much bigger than Hamlet. Bigger, indeed, than any character captured by the printed word. Who else claims equality with the creator and acts the part convincingly, with complete authority. I mean, it's the ultimate role and he doesn't blow it. Consistent in every line, he strides through four gospels; absolutely the same person, unmistakable.

So what are the options? You can forget dementia.

History alone will scrub that. History is merciless. Routinely it obliterates even the best and the brightest, let alone the mad. Yet the man who said he was God has survived for 2000 years and enjoyed huge success.

If it isn't true, we are left with the PR option. Somebody put it together, working up from the simple tragedy of a gifted Galilean who got on the wrong side of the Establishment. Hard to believe. Harder than John's opening chapter... 'the word was made flesh'.

Never mind Shakespeare's ghosts, haunting battlements and banquets. Look at the Gospel narratives. Talk about being hung for a sheep, rather than a lamb! Consider the action. Walking on water. Multiplying loaves and fishes. Routine healing of incurable ills. Raising the dead, himself included. Slipping in and out of the flesh. Finally, disappearing in a cloud. Who in his right mind would invent that stuff and hope to get away with it?

Could Shakespeare make it work? Would he even dare?

But you must not think this is terribly profound. As I say, I've been thrashing this stuff out for a long time.

Given that mood in the streets at lunchtime it all flowed out. All part of my big reaction to Ross's defection, I suppose.

YESTERDAY

'Look,' I said to old Ross in the pub. 'Look here - having regard to the human condition, Christianity is either the most fantastic good news or it's all a bloody shame - the most beautiful, sublime folly.'

'Well, I don't need it,' he said. 'And I don't care if I actually talk about it. I still respect some of the Christian writers, of course.'

'Thomas à Kempis?'

'Yes, Thomas à Kempis.'

'Teresa of Avila?'

'No; not her. I think I would prefer The Little Flower.'

'Newman?'
‘Newman and Pascal. I respect their minds. But all this paraphernalia, and the authority of the Church –’
‘Well, the Church is a society and a society always expresses itself in rituals.’
‘– and as for that bastard Muggeridge. He was telling the world about his conversion while it was still going on!’

TODAY
And there I was, like an old cart horse following rutted tracks, inside St Francis’ Church. For the 1pm mass, the normal half empty church. A typical scoop from the street outside. I looked around at the congregation and speculated on the texture of their faith. Some people pass their whole lives warm and secure in the womb of Mother Church.

The mass started, with the priest in black requiem robes. Unusual. I didn’t try to follow the mass. Well-worn phrases dropped lightly, like summer rain. I just acknowledged the words of penance, praise and petition: no bending of the mind; no calling back of wandering thoughts. Of its own volition one ‘thought’ was present, a naked thought, unclothed by words or images. I didn’t have to hold it in focus.

Then they were standing for the gospel reading.

‘...When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been four days in the grave. Since Bethany was near Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs away, many of the Jews had gone out there to comfort Martha and Mary over the loss of their brother. Martha, when she heard that Jesus had come, went out to meet him, while Mary sat on in the house. Lord, said Martha to Jesus, if thou hadst been here, my brother would not have died; and I know well that even now God will grant whatever thou wilt ask of him...’

Martha! Magnificent woman. Reproaching Christ. Straight off she comes out with what’s on her mind.

Where have you been!

Some people, more timid, would bottle it up and nurse a grudge. For most of us, of course, when someone’s dead, they’re dead: not much you can say. All you can do is try to come to grips with it. Four days in the tomb. Four days to think about it. And four nights. Yes, it must have sunk in. He was dead all right. Yet here she was, still battling on.

Marvellous to watch the double play, the drama: Christ working at two levels.

‘...Thy brother, Jesus said, will rise again. Martha said to him, I know well enough that he will rise again at the resurrection, when the last day comes. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and life; he who believes in me, though he is dead, will live on, and whoever has life, and has faith in me, to all eternity cannot die. Dost thou believe this? Yes, Lord,'
she told him, I have learned to believe that thou are the Christ; thou are the Son of the Living God; it is for thy coming the world has waited.'

Strong stuff. Then the priest moved to the sermon part.

'I would ask all of you,' he said, 'to pray for the soul of Kevin Pomeroy, who died an hour ago, aged 16.'

That's what it was all about. Poor bloody kid.

'On occasions like this,' the priest went on, 'it is well to remember that our own end may come at a time when we least expect it. Kevin Pomeroy, I know, had no inkling at 11 o'clock this morning that at this time he would be before his creator.'

An accident, then. The family, no doubt, had been on the phone to the monastery, seeking prayers for his recovery. Then, at the last minute, a change. The requiem mass. A pious family, obviously; they would ring the monastery as naturally as they would ring for a doctor. Children of the Faith. And what, I asked, was I?

My faith was beyond analysis; a mysterious by-product of the collision of forces soliciting me on the one hand to believe and on the other hand to reject belief. An agnostic believer? No; the available terms were just not adequate to contain the situation.

'It is a great benefit,' the priest went on, 'to die with the sacraments. Not everybody is granted this privilege. I know of a case of a priest living with 150 other priests. He died suddenly and no-one in that monastery was able to give him the last rites.'

'We should remember, too, that God has a purpose in permitting sudden death like this. It is one way of recalling to our minds that here we have no abiding city.'

I hoped someone from the Pomeroy circle was present because it was comforting, presented like this. It tied up; they and the boy, Martha and Mary and Lazarus. I was glad now that I was there.

When the time came for communion I joined the others, queuing in the main aisle. My lips were working. Some part of me was praying, talking. But only a simple phrase came out, very peaceful, not really a petition: 'Have mercy on us, O Lord. Have mercy on us, O Lord.' Over and over again.

Back at the pew I tried to make some appropriate post-communion prayer, but again only a single phrase came out: 'Thy truth. Thy truth.' 'Thy' seemed right — not a pious affectation. Tears began to start. I felt cleansed. Pacified.

The priest called for hymn No. 89. I reached for the hymn book in the slot in front of me and flipped through the pages.

_Nearer My God To Thee_. Protestant, isn't it? The people sang as if they knew it well, but this was the first time I had actually heard the words and the music, though the title was very familiar. Beautiful. Measured, confident phrasing. Praying with music. Perhaps this was how it was on that cold night, on the tilting deck of the _Titanic_. The
brave notes of the ship’s band. Did they play well? Curious incident.

Inspiration for a thousand jokes. Who knows – maybe it wasn’t pathetic. Maybe they were comforted. And by the way, what do you think about when you are only minutes away from certain death? There I was, off again with that imagination. Wasn’t I supposed to be praying?

The last thing I remember of that mass was the priest turning at the altar as he was about to leave and again requesting prayers for the ‘good and noble soul of Kevin Pomeroy’.

TONIGHT

Going home in the train tonight the lunchtime mass is only a record in my memory: no lingering fragrance of that emotional wellbeing remains. I have searched the evening paper. No mention of a fatal accident involving Kevin Pomeroy. And the damned tune is still going around on the turntable in my head.

_Jee-sus Christ_  
_Soo-per Star_

Hold on. I’m off again. I’ve had a thought. I’m out there at the execution, at the foot of the cross with the rest of the mob. A tough bunch, most of them, with upturned faces. Seen it all before. They’re jeering. You can hear it clearly above the groans and screams and orders.

‘Come on then! Give us a trick. Give us a miracle.’
That’s the gist of it.
‘Come down from the cross. Then we’ll believe.’
They look at each other and laugh.

In the Roman Empire crucifixions are a dime a dozen; almost a signature; and these low-rank legionaries have copped this duty scores of times. And they get all types. Would you believe, this one thinks he’s a king? And they laugh, too.

‘The King! The King of the bloody Jews!’

Some watchers are silent, thinking. Here he is, then. The boss. Struggling and squirming and heaving great gasps, like a fish out of water. Well, well. So it has come to this. So now we know. What a let down. Sorrow? For him? No; anger. Who the hell did he think he was anyway?

Pardon, where was I? The point? Yes, well, they put the same question to Superstar. Who did he think he was?

_Do you think you’re what they say you are?_

Come to think of it, they didn’t get a response either – the mob at the execution, I mean. He responded by not responding.

The turntable has stopped now.