religions

MDPI

Article

Preaching the Impossible in the Face of the Unthinkable: Nonviolence, Love, and Thanksgiving in a Coptic Easter Sermon

J. Sergius Halvorsen

Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, Yonkers, NY 10707, USA; shalvorsen@svots.edu

Abstract: This essay examines the Holy Monday sermon by Boules George, a senior priest at St. Mark Church in Cairo, that was preached the day after the Palm Sunday suicide bomb attacks against St. George Coptic Orthodox Church in Tanta and St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Alexandria in Egypt in 2017, which left forty-four people dead and more than one hundred injured. The sermon addressed Coptic Orthodox Christians in Cairo as well as the wider Coptic Orthodox community in Egypt and throughout the world through a live video broadcast. The sermon is remarkable for presenting a radical call to nonviolence and Christian love. Notably, the preacher speaks to "those who are killing us", and says "thank you" for the opportunity to die as Christ died, for "this is the greatest honor that we could have". This essay analyzes the sermon in light of the work of Walter Brueggemann and Alexander Schmemann, and argues that the sermon is an example of daring speech that offers divine empowerment to the suffering and the fearful.

Keywords: Coptic; Orthodox; Egypt; Boules George; Alexander Schmemann; Walter Brueggemann; prophecy; repentance; grief; anger; love; joy; religious violence

1. Introduction

On Palm Sunday in 2017, suicide bombers attacked St. George Coptic Orthodox Church in Tanta and St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Alexandria, Egypt. Forty-four people were killed and more than one hundred were injured.[1] The next day, on Holy Monday, Boules George, a senior priest at St. Mark Church in Cairo, preached a twenty-minute sermon to Coptic Orthodox Christians who filled the church to capacity, and to the wider Coptic Orthodox community both in Egypt and throughout the world through a live video broadcast. In the sermon, the preacher makes two radical statements to those seeking to harm the Coptic community: thank you, and we love you. The preacher says "thank you" to "those who are killing us" for the opportunity to die as Christ died, for "this is the greatest honor that we could have". He concludes the sermon by saying, "we love you . . . for Christ said that if you love those who love you, you have no profit or reward with me. . .. But I say to you, 'Love your enemies'".[2]

Shortly after I discovered the Holy Monday sermon (HMS), I presented it to a roundtable of scholars as an example of how to frame tragedy and suffering in the light of the Gospel. Following the presentation, I was surprised by the visceral negative reaction the sermon elicited in some of those who were present. They felt that the radical expression of Jesus' teaching in the HMS was insensitive to those grieving the injury or death of loved ones, and that the preacher was guilty of recklessness in light of the ongoing violence against the Coptic community. Since then, I have grappled with these criticisms, and looked for a framework that would allow me to highlight elements of the HMS that have great homiletical value. In this essay, I will use the work of Walter Brueggemann and Alexander Schmemann as a framework to analyze and constructively engage with the potentially scandalous Gospel messages in the HMS. It is my hope that through this analysis, preachers well beyond the cultural and pastoral context of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt might be able to learn from and find inspiration in the HMS.

check for updates

Citation: Halvorsen, J. Sergius. 2024. Preaching the Impossible in the Face of the Unthinkable: Nonviolence, Love, and Thanksgiving in a Coptic Easter Sermon. *Religions* 15: 455. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15040455

Academic Editor: Carolyn J. Sharp

Received: 21 January 2024
Revised: 27 March 2024
Accepted: 28 March 2024
Published: 3 April 2024

Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Walter Brueggemann (1989)'s book, *Finally Comes the Poet*, includes a provocative subtitle: *Daring Speech for Proclamation*. Drawing from Old Testament imagery and rhetoric, Brueggemann proposes a kind of poetic preaching that dares to engage the most difficult suffering that people experience with the most demanding of God's commandments. He suggests that "[T]he preacher speaks in another language, a language not frontal but subtle, a voice not assaulting but surprising, speech not predictable but faithful in its daring" (Brueggemann 1989, p. 141). If nothing else, the HMS is certainly daring, surprising, and unpredictable. In this essay I will use some of Brueggemann's ideas to serve as a framework to assess the poetic and prophetic rhetoric of the HMS.

Alexander Schmemann, well known for his work in liturgical theology, was a noted apologist for the embodied sacramental theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and particularly its powerful focus on the Paschal mystery and the seemingly incongruous yet magnificently wonderful possibility of finding hope and joy in the midst of the greatest sorrow. Here is one example of his exuberant approach:

> If the entire life of the Church is above all one continuous burst of praise, blessing and thanksgiving, if this thanksgiving is raised up both out of joy and out of sorrow, out of the depths of both happiness and misfortune, out of both life and death, if the most bitter graveside lamentation is transformed by it into a song of praise, "Alleluia", then it is because the Church is the meeting with God which has been accomplished in Christ. (Schmemann 1988, p. 176)

Schmemann's work, grounded in Orthodox Christian theology and liturgy, will provide a framework for a deeper understanding of the theology of the HMS.

The HMS is not an easy sermon to hear. It is demanding, it is daring, and it is biblical in a highly complex way. Daring Christian preaching is challenging; its depth and edginess are the antithesis of saccharine platitudes. The unflinching call to repentance and obedience of prophetic preaching are the antithesis of contemporary political discourse, which focuses on the failures of the opponent. For these reasons, some people may conclude that the HMS is unacceptable; they may simply have no place in their theology for this kind of biblical message. However, drawing from the work of both Brueggemann and Schmemann, I will argue that the HMS intentionally reframes the persecution and vulnerability of the Coptic minority in terms of agency, witness, and spiritual empowerment.

2. Context

Coptic Christians have lived as a minority community in Egypt for more than a thousand years. Their minority status has deeply affected their spirituality and self-identity. Martin Mosebach, in his book *The 21: A Journey into the Land of Coptic Martyrs*, explores the faith and spirituality of the Coptic community through its veneration of the twenty-one martyrs who were killed in 2015 by members of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Mosebach summarizes the situation in this way: "The fate of Coptic Christians in Egypt does not look bright, and it doesn't take an oracle to predict rough times ahead. But we mustn't forget that the Copts have fared badly or very badly ever since the Islamic conquest of the country in the seventh century, meaning that they have had it hard for the last fourteen hundred years or so. Our present day marks just one more instance in a long series of scourges" (Mosebach 2020, pp. 14–15). The spirituality and self-identity of the Coptic Christian community has been profoundly affected by persecution: to be a Coptic Christian in Egypt is to live as a member of a minority community with a long history of oppression and marginalization that continues to the present day. It must be noted that there are, and have been, countless Egyptian Muslims who have shown respect, kindness, and goodwill towards their Coptic neighbors. One cannot characterize the entire majority Muslim population in Egypt as being overtly hostile to the Coptic Christians, and it is unequivocally not the intention of this essay to cast Muslims in a negative light. Nevertheless, in order properly to understand the function of the arguments in the Holy Monday sermon, it is important to note that the self-identity and spirituality of Coptic Christians has been, and continues to be, shaped by their experience historically as a persecuted minority

community. While there are a great number of Christians whose spirituality has been shaped by persecution and suffering, the perspective of Coptic Christians in Egypt is substantially different from that of many Christians in North American and European contexts, especially those in dominant-culture groups whose spirituality and self-identity have been strongly informed by: (1) the historical legacy of "Christendom" as politically established and socially authorized, and (2) the religious freedom of democratic, pluralistic societies.

Members of a majority religion, especially if that religion is sponsored by the state, will often support the use of force to maintain law and order, and to protect citizens at home and abroad. The various "just war" theories held by different Christian communities are examples of the way that majority Christian communities can endorse the use of force. The privilege to rely on or appeal to the power of the state for protection can predispose some believers against a radical call to nonviolence and forgiveness of enemies. In a position of privilege, where physical force is available as a means for security and safety, one has the opportunity to question or even reject a Christian spirituality that embraces nonviolence, radical forgiveness, and love for the enemy. Minority communities that do not possess force as a viable option for self-protection might then be predisposed to embracing a radical message of love and forgiveness as a means of empowerment. This is not to say that minority, oppressed Christian communities always eschew the use of force to protect themselves. Nevertheless, the theological and homiletical approach in the HMS makes a radical call to nonviolence and forgiveness in the face of oppression and persecution, and this essay will attempt to demonstrate that this message is uniquely empowering for this minority community.

In addition to its message of radical forgiveness and love, the silence of the HMS on political issues stands in striking contrast to many of the best-known speeches and sermons delivered by leaders of the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., which explicitly combine theological and political themes and ideas. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to offer a detailed comparison between Coptic Christian spirituality and the Christian spirituality that undergirded the twentieth-century Civil Rights movement in the U.S., it is interesting to note that the two share an emphasis on nonviolence and a bold acknowledgement of suffering and death. "The history of pain is part of the power of African American preaching. This is not to celebrate death and pain but to acknowledge it as part of human reality" (Powery 2012, p. 40). To North Americans or Europeans, where free speech is protected, one might imagine that a sermon immediately following a terrorist attack might have included a strong appeal to justice, a call to mobilize for political action, or even a direct appeal to the use of military force. The political and legal context for Coptic Christians in Egypt is substantially different: they do not enjoy the same freedom of speech that Western preachers enjoy; speaking out against the government can result in arrest, torture, or death. Therefore, leaders in the Coptic Church take care to avoid politics in preaching and public communications.[3] While Coptic Christians have been and continue to be active in Egyptian politics, Coptic preachers tend to maintain an apolitical stance in preaching, and Coptic bishops in Egypt and abroad explicitly instruct their priests to avoid mentioning politics in their sermons.[4] While more research would be required to demonstrate a causal relationship between the political disadvantage of the Coptic community and the apolitical theological message of the HMS, there is an interesting correlation. Having no feasible recourse to political activism, and with little or no hope in a governmental solution for the oppression of the Coptic community, the HMS offers a message that calls Coptic Christians to action that is apolitical and nonviolent: it is a call to forgive, to love, and to pray for the enemy.

The Coptic community suffered terrible violence in the Palm Sunday suicide bombings, and in such a situation, one would expect that some of those grieving would have felt a desire to respond to violence with violence, or at least to respond with a heightened adversarial posture towards the majority Muslim community. It is also possible that the preacher, a senior leader in the community, perceived the terrorist attacks as an attempt by extremists to provoke the Coptic community into a violent reaction, which then might

fuel an even stronger anti-Coptic backlash among the majority. In such circumstances, the strikingly apolitical, nonviolent message of the sermon was a brilliant calculation on the part of the preacher: redirecting the angry and grieving community away from a desire for vengeance, and instead towards mercy and love of the enemy. However, the message of the HMS is far from a capitulation, because it reframes the narrative of victimization as an opportunity for the community to actualize their Christian identity through Christ-like nonviolence. Instead of being trapped in the vicious circle of responding to anger with anger, or responding to violence with violence, the community is given a narrative that defines a loving, merciful, nonviolent response as a form of subversive agency that possesses eternal value in the eyes of God.

The message of the HMS embodies the kind of poetic redefinition that Walter Brueggemann identifies in the Daniel narratives of the Old Testament. He argues that resistance in the face of oppression is achieved through radical obedience to God, who is not subject to the powers of this world. "Remember *who* you are by remembering *whose* you are. Be your own person even in the face of the empire, of the dominant ideology, of the great power of death" (Brueggemann 1989, p. 121; emphasis original). The week between Palm Sunday and Easter is a solemn liturgical season for Coptic Christians, in which the faithful gather in church daily for lengthy services leading up to Pascha. This provided a striking opportunity to define the community's suffering in terms of the suffering of Jesus.

The Holy Week and Easter services of the Coptic Church present the voluntary suffering of Jesus as an opportunity to behold the power and beauty of God's love manifest in the world through Jesus' response to those who betrayed, abused, and crucified him. Similarly, the HMS defined the contemporary crisis, with its concomitant grief and suffering, as an opportunity for the faithful to encounter and bear witness to the transformative power of God's love and mercy in the midst of unspeakable suffering. This is not to say that persecution, suffering, and violence are in any way beautiful. They are not beautiful—they are horrific and ugly. However, if it can be said that Jesus' response to suffering, persecution, and violence is beautiful, then the sermon invites the faithful to frame their experience of persecution and suffering as a participation in the Paschal mystery. In light of Brueggemann's assertion, the HMS gives the community an opportunity to reaffirm their identity as those who belong to Jesus Christ through their emulation of Jesus' loving response to violence and injustice. While the terrorists who acted on that Palm Sunday in 2017 sought to eliminate the Coptic community, the message of the HMS allows the grieving to reaffirm their resilience and identity through an unlikely response to violence. Brueggemann, referring to the preacher as a poet, suggests: "Poets, in the moment of preaching, are permitted to perceive and voice the world differently, to dare a new phrase, a new picture, a fresh juxtaposition of matters long known" (Brueggemann 1989, p. 109). This is certainly the case for the radical gospel message of the HMS.

3. Amazement and Glad Obedience

Brueggemann suggests that preaching that models praise "invites the congregation out of the world of alienation and repressed rage into a world changed by the coming of God. This preaching moves the congregation to amazement and glad obedience" (Brueggemann 1989, p. 74). The HMS leads the hearer into amazement and glad obedience by opening with a quote from one of the lectionary texts read during the services of Holy Monday: "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified" (John 12:23).[5] The preacher, Fr. George, notes that Jesus does not say that the hour has come for him to be beaten, whipped, or crucified, but glorified. Then the preacher creatively speaks from the perspective of Jesus: "So, He wants to say that our pain is the glory". From the very beginning of the sermon, the preacher redefines the tragedy in positive terms, linking the suffering of the community to the suffering of Jesus, and in the same way that the Paschal mystery redefines the violence against Jesus in terms of God's glory, the preacher redefines the violence suffered by the community as an opportunity to glorify God. He defines the violence of the bombings in terms of glory: "I want to talk about the glory that happened in

our Church today through three messages. The first message is directed to the community, the parents of the wounded and the dead, and to the entire Church. The second message will be for those who went before us to heaven today. The third message is to those who kill us".

Speaking to the community, the preacher neither denies nor minimizes the grief and anguish of the community; he acknowledges that the pain and suffering are profound. Quoting Jesus' words, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death" (Matt 26:38), Fr. George stresses that the community cannot ignore the pain that they are experiencing, and he offers a poignant word of consolation: "Christ consoles us . . . and if we deny sorrow then we are not human, because sorrow is a component of human beings. May God console you". For some hearers, the brevity of this consolation might be startling, particularly in a time of such powerful grief. However, Brueggemann notes, "The artful drama of hurt healed requires an artful voice that stands shrewdly against the voices that . . . offer healing too soon and too cheaply" (Brueggemann 1989, p. 15). A superficial attempt at consolation (e.g., "I'm sorry for your loss") is not particularly effective because it does little to reframe the powerful emotions of grief. While Fr. George's brief word of consolation informs the hearers that he appreciates and recognizes the suffering of those who are grieving, the power of the HMS lies in its radical redefinition of what has happened.

The preacher tells two stories that redefine death. First, he tells a story about a man who compared the white garment that each Coptic Christian receives at baptism to a burial shroud. The man says, "The Copt leaves baptism carrying his shroud. What does this mean? Don't we die with Christ in baptism?. . . I am going to Christ carrying my shroud". The second story is about a family who asks local clergy to intervene on their behalf with a family member who was keeping his coffin in the house. When the clergy speak with the man and ask him to reconsider his practice for the sake of family members who feel uneasy about seeing the coffin, the man reflects on the capricious nature of his emotions. The man notes that he feels inspired and faithful during Holy Week, Pascha, and other feasts, but at other times, he is all too easily distracted by earthly cares. He keeps his coffin in the home so that every day before he goes to sleep, he can say to it, "I don't know if tomorrow I will be inside you or on my bed". This practice allows him to maintain a spiritual sobriety through the constant remembrance of his own death. These sermonic illustrations define death as a reality that is not to be feared, and in the broader context of the sermon, this addresses the fear that the community is naturally feeling in light of the Palm Sunday attacks.

This first section of Fr. George's sermon concludes with a reference to the Synaxarion, which is the generic name given to hagiographic collections that are read in worship services as well as in private devotions. The preacher notes that unlike the closed canon of the Bible, the Synaxarion is an open canon: every day more stories are added as more of the faithful are added to the ranks of the saints. Here, he notes other recent murders of Coptic Christians, including the beheading of twenty-one Christians in Libya (these events are chronicled in detail in Mosebach (2020)). This reference to the Synaxarion clearly implies that those Christians who died in the recent attacks are martyrs—saints—which offers a deeper kind of consolation to the grieving, assuring them that their loved ones have been successful in following Christ in this life. This also provides an effective transition to the next section of the sermon, which is addressed to those who have died.

Here, the preacher speaks to the dead, those members of the community recently killed who are not physically present. This illustrates the liminal quality of the post-trauma experience. "In this middle space of traumatic experience, there is no clear division between death and life, no linear move from loss to resurrection. Instead, life and death blur together in a middle space that is murky, broken, and yet searching for hope" (Wagner 2023, p. 95). Rhetorically, speaking to the dead is a brilliant strategy, because addressing the dead serves to emphasize their presence, and this has a powerful spiritual and psychological implication for the hearers. The first message that the preacher offers to the departed is: "Welcome home! God embraces you as children and you enter [heaven] wearing a crown

of glory". Then, in a particularly bold rhetorical turn, the preacher says that the martyrs are the fortunate ones. He says to them: "I don't know why God has not chosen me . . . could it be because of my sins? Could it be because I have not yet repented? Trust me, . . . if we were ready, then God would not have kept from us the crown of martyrdom. . .. You martyrs are the grain of wheat that produces much fruit".

The rhetoric is shocking: those who have died a violent death are more fortunate than those who are still alive. This is one of the first places in the sermon where the preacher directly inverts conventional wisdom with the "foolishness" of the word of the Cross (1 Cor 1:18). It is a bold approach, and it may have been shocking to some hearers, but it unequivocally redefines tragedy as spiritual victory, and gives those who grieve an opportunity to embrace a narrative of agency.

Then the preacher reflects on an event from earlier in the year, when terrorist threats against Christians began to be broadcast on the Internet during the season of Advent. At that time, many observers had thought that Christians would be intimidated and might stay home and watch Christmas services via television or livestream, but in fact, the preacher notes, during this time the churches were full. This section of the sermon concludes by returning to the image of the baptismal garment/burial shroud:

> [E]veryone is carrying his shroud in his hand and saying, "we have come to die for Christ". This is the best death, death inside His house. That is why we tell [the martyrs], "you are the grain of wheat. The grain of wheat that brought many people [to deeper faith]". . . . Every Christian who has died for the sake of Christ, during every persecution throughout history, was numbered—known—by God, and you martyrs continue in the chain. You are fortunate.

Here, it is interesting to note that the HMS was delivered inside a church packed with people, so the gathered worshippers (along with those watching the video) would have made a particularly strong connection between their situation and previous times when people responded to threats and fear by defiantly attending church services in the face of potential violence. Also, by speaking to the "martyrs" (and not simply to the "dead"), the preacher defines those who have been killed as Christian heroes, saints whose tragic death is not a mere tragedy, but is actually a victory of the Gospel.

The final section of the sermon is addressed "to those who kill us". Rhetorically, this functions in at least four different ways:

(a) Since the sermon was broadcast, and made available on streaming media, it is possible that some of those who were seeking to harm the Coptic Christians may have actually heard the preacher addressing them;

(b) In the same way that speaking to the martyrs makes present, or calls to remembrance, those who have died, speaking to "those who kill us" asks the hearers to consider those who wish them harm. This is another striking turn that runs counter to the conventional wisdom in times of violence, which would tend to isolate the grieving from those who have caused harm. The sermon, instead of dehumanizing or objectifying the enemy, makes the enemy present so that they might be forgiven and loved in Christ. While this approach might seem extremely unusual, it is very much in line with what Walter Burghardt argues for when preaching a "just word". Reflecting on the biblical prophetic literature, he suggests that the preacher should provide a "soul-piercing word that conveys what a revealing God expects of them, a justice that mimics God's own fidelity to God's promises" (Burghardt 1996, p. 21). A less biblical, less demanding message might be easier to speak and hear, but it would leave the hearers further from God in a moment when closeness to God is the only hope for a community that is otherwise powerless;

(c) It is likely that the hearers present in that Holy Monday worship service were afraid of more suicide attacks. Despite heightened security measures, there was a possibility that suicide bombers were literally standing in their midst as they were listening to the HMS. It is important to note that the preacher did not say, "Look out, be afraid, terrorists might be among you!" Rather, the rhetorical strategy of speaking to

"those who kill us" might have served to redefine the fear that the hearers felt at that moment, to reframe their feeling of helplessness into an experience of agency and Christian witness;

(d) The suicide bombers who actually carried out the Palm Sunday attacks were just as "distant" from the hearers as the new martyrs addressed earlier in the sermon: the terrorists, too, were dead. When the hearers identify "those who kill us" as the bombers who died in the attacks, then the preacher's speaking to them functions similarly to the previous section addressed to the martyrs. By speaking to the dead terrorists—by rhetorically making them present—the preacher offers the message that not even death can prevent the Christian from expressing mercy and love to the enemy.

4. Thanksgiving

Addressing "those who kill us", the sermon concludes with the boldest and most shocking portion of the homiletical message:

> The first thing we will say is "Thank you very, very much", and you won't believe us when we say it. You know why we thank you? I'll tell you. You won't get it, but please believe us. You gave us to die the same death as Christ—and this is the biggest honor we could have. Christ was crucified—and this is our faith. He died and was slaughtered—and this is our faith. You gave us, and you gave them, to die. Thank you for shortening our journey home.... We also want to say, "We love you". This may be hard for you to believe, but it is the teaching of Christ, and I want to tell you how wonderful he is. Christ says that loving those who love us profits us nothing, but we are to love our enemies (Matt 5:44). We Christians don't have enemies. We don't have enemies; others make enmity with us. The Christian doesn't make enemies because we are commanded to love everyone. And so, we love you because this is the teaching of our God—that I'm to love you—no matter what you do to me.

This section of the sermon is the most difficult part of the message, and for some hearers it might simply be unacceptable; it may be too radical. In contemporary American political discourse, elected leaders and pundits across the political spectrum will often respond to acts of violence and terror with confident assertions that justice will be carried out through swift military retribution, such as "We will not forgive. We will not forget. We will hunt you down and make you pay".[6] To thank those who do violence to your community stands in stark, almost absurd contrast to the rhetoric that is not only normative, but in some cases, expected from those in positions of authority. Yet, a leader who possesses the power to order military strikes against people in a country on the other side of the world speaks from a profoundly different perspective than a Coptic Orthodox Christian priest in Cairo.

Fr. Boules George, the preacher who delivered the HMS, was a member of the group that had been attacked; he was just as powerless, just as vulnerable, just as much affected by the tragedy as the rest of the community. In fact, as a prominent clergyman, he may have been at even greater risk of violence than others. This preacher was not an objective outsider who possessed the power and authority to prevent violence. He was not a person of privilege saying to an oppressed people, "Jesus is telling you just to bear your suffering patiently". Indeed, such a message would be unacceptable for many reasons. However, when Western Christians hear a Coptic Christian say, "thank you", to those who are killing his people, it is important to remember that the preacher has no military to back him up, no armed force to do his bidding. Rather, he speaks from a position of weakness, speaking to an oppressed minority community: he speaks as one without privilege and without authority.[7] Yet, just like Jesus who said that he did not speak on his own authority (John 8:28; 12:49; 14:10), the preacher of the HMS shares with the community the Word of God, which offers his community an identity of Christian agency. To "say thank you to those who are killing us" is an act of loving rebellion; it says, "You may possess the power to kill

us, but we claim an even greater power in the name of Jesus: we claim the power to love through giving thanks". Or in the words of Alexander Schmemann, "Thanksgiving is the experience of paradise" (Schmemann 1988, p. 174).

The Christian faith expressed in the HMS embodies this eucharistic, sacrificial love in a way that might offend some hearers, particularly those who possess power and privilege. Quite simply, when one possesses power and privilege, it is tempting to resort to political discourse and eschew the radical nature of the Gospel for a message that is ultimately concerned with achieving objectives through means that require no divine intervention whatsoever. Yet, when a preacher has no political voice, and cannot appeal to worldly power to mete out justice, the radical message of the Cross is the only option left. In the HMS one sees just how powerful this message can be in offering people an opportunity to find love and joy in the darkest moments of life. Schmemann reflects on this mystery, saying that in Christ, "all beauty and all frustration, all hunger and all satisfaction are referred to their ultimate End and become finally meaningful . . . love is sacrificial: it puts value, the very meaning of life in the other and gives life to the other, and in this giving, in this sacrifice, finds the meaning and joy of life" (Schmemann 2000, p. 35).

5. Repentance

In a final prophetic twist in the HMS, the preacher underlines the call to love the enemy through a call to repentance disguised in a narrative:

> In one of our dioceses there's a man who regularly broadcasts horrible things about Christians, unheard of things. So, the servants[8] of the community came to the bishop and told him about the man. The bishop says, "Are you upset by what this man says?" And they say, "Of course! We are so upset! What's he doing to us?!"
>
> The bishop gets quiet and his face darkens with sorrow.
>
> The servants say to him, "You have a right to be upset from what he says, Your Grace. You have a right".
>
> "I'm not upset with him", the bishop says, "I'm upset with you! You are servants—you? How many of you pray for him every day? Because if he tasted of the love of God, if he knew who our Lord is, he could never hate again because God is love. How many of you are praying for him? Aren't you servants?! Aren't you Christians?! So you are a servant teaching in the Sunday School here, and you've broken the commandment of Christ to pray for this person?!"

By sharing the story of the lay leaders who were offended by the derogatory statements against Christians by the heckler, the preacher identifies with the outrage and anger felt by the community against those who threaten them. (It is interesting to note that the preacher assigns no religious affiliation to the heckler; he never says that the man is a member of the majority community.) Then, the darkening of the bishop's countenance and the comments by the leaders that he has every right to be upset with the man constitute a clear setup, leading the hearers to think, "now our bishop is going to validate our anger by criticizing those who falsely accuse us". But, in a dramatic twist reminiscent of the encounter between King David and Nathan the prophet (2 Sam 12:7), the bishop criticizes the Christian lay leaders for failing to obey Christ's command to love the enemy and pray for him. While the preacher does not explicitly tell the hearers to repent from the anger they feel towards those who wish them harm, this move is a highly sophisticated rhetorical means of achieving that very end through a compelling narrative.

For many Western Christians, a call to repentance might seem out of place in a sermon addressed to people experiencing profound grief and fear. How could a responsible pastor call grieving and fearful people to repent of the tendency to be angry with, or even hate, those who wish them harm? One reason could be that the pastor is keenly aware that his community is on the brink of responding to violence with violence, and he may have felt that this is precisely what the terrorists were hoping to precipitate. Joni Sancken notes that

trauma can interfere with the victim's sense of identity. She argues that preachers can "help guide people spiritually and morally so that they can live by their values during seasons where a traumatic wound may be interfering with a sense of identity. Preachers can remind hearers who they are in Christ" (Sancken 2019, p. 90). But an even deeper reason for this call to repent from judging the enemy is that it is a message inherent to the prophetic voice of scripture. Paul Tarazi is one of many authors who have noted that an essential component of prophetic preaching is repentance. Repentance was "a radical return to God, was an indispensable condition for the new chapter God would consider opening, and as such was an integral part of prophetic preaching" (Tarazi 1983, p. 24). Inasmuch as the HMS is a call for the grieving, suffering people to turn towards God in obedience and humility, a call to repentance is quite appropriate. Brueggemann takes the idea even further, noting that the call to obedience should, by its nature, be dramatic: "Reflection about obedience in the sermon is more effective and compelling when it is bold and imaginative, well beyond our present capacity for action". He notes that in situations such as the Civil Rights protests, "liturgy and preaching have led to daring action for the sake of God's kingdom. . .. It is the imaginative anticipation of the gospel that invites us in many ways and places out of and beyond ourselves in missional caring for God's kingdom" (Brueggemann 1989, p. 89).

As a call to obedience that is bold and imaginative, the HMS concludes by exhorting the faithful to love in a way that might seem well beyond one's capacity of present action. The preacher asks the community,

> So what do you think? How about we make a commitment to pray for [those who are killing us]? Pray that they know the God of love? Pray that they experience the love of God? Because if they knew that God is love and experienced His love, they could not do these things—never, never, never. We must pray for them so they can sleep at night, because someone so filled with hate can never sleep. We are being slaughtered and the King of Peace gives us peace to sleep. And the one who slaughters, all night he can't sleep. . .. Pray for them. Take it as a command. Take it as a duty. Take it as the application of Christ's instructions.

6. Conclusions

Fr. Philopateer Younan, a Coptic Orthodox priest who grew up in Egypt and now serves a parish in the United States, found that the response to the HMS from the Coptic community was largely positive. He said there were a few Coptic Christians who reacted negatively, concerned that thanking those who seek to harm the Coptic community might invite further violence. Fr. Philopateer noted that for those with little spiritual background, thanking the enemy is a difficult message. Yet, he said that among the Coptic community with whom he is acquainted, this was a minority opinion.[9]

Some Western Christians might be scandalized by the HMS, with its call to radical nonviolence and love of the enemy, the preacher even giving thanks to those who are hurting the community. Doing so directly contradicts the fundamental temptation to respond to injustice or unfairness—perceived or real—with violence. The scandal of the HMS might be particularly acute for Christians whose spirituality has been shaped by imperial Christendom—and the implicit or explicit conjunction of church and state, in which armies fought, and occasionally won, great wars to defend Christians against non-Christian enemies—as they may believe that they have a theological justification for responding to violence with violence. While Fr. George recognizes the fundamental temptation to respond to violence with violence (evidenced by the inclusion of the call to repentance), he does not speak from a theological perspective shaped by imperial Christendom. For an Egyptian Coptic community that has very little hope in the worldly power structures of wealth and military force, the HMS offers tremendous hope though obedience to the seemingly foolish Gospel commands to love the enemy and to pray for one's persecutors (Matt 5:43) and to give thanks to God for all things (Eph 5:20). Ultimately, the message of the HMS opens up for the grieving and the fearful the possibility of joy. For preachers living in countries with powerful militaries, where freedom of speech is

protected by law, and where many people live within echo chambers of harsh political discourse, the HMS offers a challenging paradigm for Gospel preaching that emphasizes the power of God, and leads to greater joy and peace that surpasses all understanding (Phil 4:7).

The final lines of the Holy Monday sermon, anticipating the celebration of Jesus' resurrection, invite the community to Paschal joy:

> God give us JOY because Christ's promise is truth. He said, "I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy NO ONE will take from you" (John 16:22). Some forty martyrs were called by God, and there are many in the hospital who will also be called. All of them are wearing crowns. They will celebrate Pascha in the Kingdom. They are praying for us. The rest is on us. O, you lucky, lucky, lucky ones! And until it is our turn, to our God be the glory now and forever. Amen.

Schmemann argues that "from its very beginning Christianity has been the proclamation of joy, of the only possible joy on earth" (Schmemann 2000, p. 24). It is the joy that comes from a deep and profound meditation on the mystery of Jesus' crucifixion: the mysterious revelation of God's love, and power in and through an event of profound suffering and injustice. Schmemann goes on to say, "[i]t is only as joy that the Church was victorious in the world. . . . Joy, however, is not something that one can define or analyze. One enters into joy". For Christians, the way that one fundamentally enters into joy is through thanksgiving, the Eucharist, which Schmemann calls "the sacrament of joy" (Schmemann 2000, pp. 24–25).

Whether one is offended or inspired by it, the Holy Monday sermon of Fr. Boules George is profoundly and unapologetically biblical, and it boldly embraces the scandal of Jesus' teaching, crucifixion, and death. Echoing Paul's words of encouragement to the Christians in Rome, "As it is written: 'For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Rom 8:36–37). The radical message gives the community a word they can speak to their departed loved ones: "In your death you fulfill Christ's commandment and you inspire us to do the same". The sermon also proposes a message to those who persecute them: "Your violence does not weaken us, nor does it weaken our faith. In fact, it strengthens our resolve to follow Christ, and in the name of him who died for us on the Cross and was raised from the dead on the third day, we say, 'Thank you and we love you.'" The message of the HMS empowers the victim to defiantly reject the tactics of the oppressor, and it allows those who are persecuted to claim agency. It is a message that powerfully, and with scripturally grounded genius, offers God's hope to a community that has every reason to despair of its situation in worldly terms. It is a message that subverts and transcends the narrative of "might makes right", providing a counter-narrative that emphasizes Jesus' forgiveness, mercy, and love, which offers suffering people agency, hope, and divine power.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Arwa Gaballa and Ahmed Tolba. "Palm Sunday bombings of Egyptian Coptic churches kill 44" *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-violence/palm-sunday-bombings-of-egyptian-coptic-churches-kill-44-idUSKBN17B06U (accessed on 7 July 2021).

2 I am immensely grateful to Fr. Philopateer Younan, Laura Michael, and Hedra Faltas, who provided me with an English translation of the entire sermon.

3 Fr. Philopateer Younan, phone interview by author, 15 October 2021.

4 See Note 3 above.

5 All biblical texts quoted in this essay are drawn from the New King James Version (1982).

[6] From U.S. president Joe Biden's speech following the suicide bombings in Kabul, quoted by Esau McCaulley, "The Dangerous Politics of 'We Will Not Forgive,'" *The New York Times*, 19 September 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/19/opinion/revenge-forgiveness-terrorism-biden.html (accessed on 7 July 2021).

[7] Commenting on the fall of Christendom in the West, Craddock writes, "An examination of the great [Western] evangelistic sermons of the past makes it clear that the speaker assumed at the outset that the hearers were part of a culture that was Christian and the appeal to them was simply not to be 'holdouts.' This condition is rapidly disappearing, and the claim of the gospel must be presented on is own terms with the understanding that the hearers stand amid several alternatives" (Craddock 2001, p. 14).

[8] Coptic Christians use the term "servants" to refer to lay leaders in the community.

[9] See Note 3 above.

References

Brueggemann, Walter. 1989. *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Burghardt, Walter J. 1996. *Preaching the Just Word*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Craddock, Fred B. 2001. *As One without Authority*, rev ed. St. Louis: Chalice Press.
Mosebach, Martin. 2020. *The 21: A Journey into the Land of the Coptic Martyrs*. Walden: Plough Publishing House.
Powery, Luke A. 2012. *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Sancken, Joni S. 2019. *Words that Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
Schmemann, Alexander. 1988. *The Eucharist*. Translated by Paul Kachur. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
Schmemann, Alexander. 2000. *For the Life of the World*, rev and expanded ed. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
Tarazi, Paul N. 1983. The Fundamental Aspects of Prophetic Preaching. In *God's Living Word: Orthodox and Evangelical Essays on Preaching*. Edited by Theodore Stylianopoulos. Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, pp. 13–26.
Wagner, Kimberly R. 2023. *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.