Christianity and
The Future of the Church

1 May 2022
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Psalm 110 Matthew 16: 13–23

The Lord has sworn
  and will not change his mind,
‘You are a priest forever
  after the order of Melchiz’edek.’ (Psalm 110)

‘Forever’ is a big word. I wonder when would you say it?

‘I will love you forever.’ ‘I will be forever in your debt.’ ‘I will forever treasure this memory.’ You’ll be able to think of your own examples.

And I wonder whether, when you *have* said it, you thought of it as a rhetorical flourish?; or something which you longed to be true even if it might turn out not to be?; or something in which you had complete confidence?

Many of us make such ‘forever’ statements in the form of promises at certain key points in our lives. When marrying for example (‘to have and to hold till death us do part’), or if we are ordained. To be a priest in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions of the Church at least (and that includes Anglican traditions) is, barring extreme eventualities, to be a priest *forever*, and in the context of ordination the church often invokes our Old Testament reading—Psalm 110: ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek’. In fact, the words in the Psalm are addressed by God to a king—King David—while the Melchizedek they refer to is a rather mysterious Canaanite who only makes a cameo appearance in the book of Genesis, bringing gifts of bread and wine to Abraham as he returns victorious from battle. But the statement has nevertheless been understood by the Church to reveal something of what priesthood in general means, and Christian priesthood in particular .

So now let me ask you when you would think it was clearly *wrong* to say ‘forever’. When would you recoil from it? Perhaps if a new movement on the American Right sought to ensure that the only people who could ever be US President, in perpetuity, were the descendants of Donald Trump. Perhaps (to invoke a more darkly immediate reality, at least for now) if you said that Ukraine’s true place in the geopolitical order was forever to be part of a Greater (and ‘Holy’) Russia. Political invocations of foreverness ought rightly to alarm us. Even Hitler in 1934 only imagined his Reich would last for a thousand years. Meanwhile, plutocrats who get excited at the prospect that advances in modern science may allow them to live forever sound pretty sinister.

In a sermon series like this one, inviting us to think about the future (and, specifically, various futures for various things) it seems appropriate to give at least passing consideration to whether any of these futures can stake a claim to being a forever sort of future. Or is it always and inevitably a sign of human hubris to attribute that foreverness to any reality under the sun? Looking down the list of subjects that will be addressed in this term's sermon series, there are few if any that have a plausible claim to have no sell-by date at all. Not even the planet. In an era when the future of earthly existence itself seems to be in question, we probably find ourselves hesitating to affirm such age-old certainties as that spring will follow winter, or (depending on where we are) the rainy season the dry.

And yet, in various formulations and contexts, the Church has made just this claim about itself. In Roman Catholic tradition, this is called the dogma of the indefectibility of the Church, and it has been summarized as follows: 'The Church remains and will remain the Institution of Salvation, founded by Christ, until the end of the world'. And because this is not a prediction of bare survival (that is, it is not merely a claim the Church will 'remain', but that it will 'remain the Institution of Salvation'), this dogma of indefectibility is closely associated with defences of the infallibility of the Church's teaching office, and the integrity and necessity of preserving the apostolic succession, running from Peter to every subsequent Pope and bishop.

According to one Catholic Encyclopedia:

> The Church can never undergo any constitutional change which will make it, as a social organism, something different from what it was originally. It can never become corrupt in faith or in morals; nor can it ever lose the Apostolic hierarchy, or the sacraments through which Christ communicates grace to men.

And the principal support for this great claim are some words found in our second reading this evening. Jesus asks his disciples 'Who do you say that I am?'. And it is Simon Peter who replies, in the first great acknowledgement of Jesus's messianic status to be recorded on any of the disciples' lips: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God'. To which Jesus responds, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.'

It is above all on the basis of this episode that later arguments are made (and here I quote the Encyclopedia again) that 'the storms which the Church encounters' will never be able to 'shake it [so] as to alter its essential characteristics and make it other than Christ intended it to be'.

But at this point—for something in a very different tone—let me turn to the words of a more recent occupant of the Throne of St Peter: Pope Benedict XVI (though his delivery of these words dates from a time before took his place in that venerable line of succession).

In 1969, when he was still Joseph Ratzinger, he gave a broadcast on German radio whose subject was 'what will become of the Church in the future?'. And one of his talk's main qualities was a certain tentativeness: 'Let us', he insisted, be cautious in our prognostications'.

> [M]an is an abyss; what will rise out of these depths, no one can see in advance. And whoever believes that the Church is not only determined by the abyss that is man, but reaches down into the greater, infinite abyss that is God, will be the first to hesitate with his predictions, for this naïve desire to know for sure could only be the announcement of his own historical ineptitude.

With that introduction, Ratzinger went on to speak both to and about a Church for whom ‘indefectibility’ did not seem a very apt first word for which to reach. Indeed, since 1969, it may well have come to seem less and less apt. This is the Church that in modern Western Europe has seen its role and authority in public life evaporate in the face of a seemingly inevitable set of processes we call ‘secularization’. It is a Church riven with scandals of child sexual abuse, in multiple denominations and in all parts of the world. It is a Church which, in Russian Orthodoxy’s present incarnation, blesses the prosecutors of a wicked, egotistical and vicious war in the name of the Prince of Peace. To speak confidently of the security and integrity of this Church’s future surely seems unwise and possibly also unwelcome. And the Gospel should perhaps have prepared us for this, for the very Peter who confesses Christ almost immediately fails him, and is condemned in the most severe terms as ‘satanic’.

This is perhaps why Ratzinger decided to focus not on a grand word like ‘indefectibility’ as his first—or even his last—word for the Church. He did not seek to anticipate and bolster the Church of his present moment by appeal to a glorious destiny. Instead, back then in 1969, he chose to anticipate only what we might call the ‘middle distance’ of the Church’s future, invoking qualities like ‘poverty’ and ‘simplicity’ to characterize it. That’s as far as he was prepared to go, wary of the hubris of leaping to ‘forever’.

> From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge—a Church that has lost much. She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes, so she will lose many of her social privileges. In contrast to an earlier age, she will be seen much more as a voluntary society, entered only by free decision. As a small society, she will make much bigger demands on the initiative of her individual members. Undoubtedly she will discover new forms of ministry […].

Then he says this:

> But in all of the changes at which one might guess, the Church will find her essence afresh and with full conviction in that which was always at her centre.

‘Her essence’. That might give us occasion to pause. For suddenly, in one respect, his tentative rhetoric recalls the rather more gung-ho Encyclopedia entry I was quoting from earlier, when discoursing on indefectibility:

> [T]he storms which the Church encounters’ will never be able to ‘shake it [so] as to alter its *essential* characteristics and make it other than Christ intended it to be.

This raises an important question. Does the Church have an ‘essence”?

Speaking personally, I doubt it. And I certainly think that any inclination on the part of the Church to think of itself in terms of having an ‘essence’ (in the sense of some principle or quality internal to it; possessed and held within itself) is not healthy for it. One of the great images of the Church in the New Testament is of the vine and the branches. The branch has no essence other than that of the vine. The vine supplies the life and health that sustain the branch. Without it, it is only good for firewood.

On the other hand, in the same sentence as he talks of its essence, Ratzinger also claims that the true Church has a ‘centre’, which may not be the same thing as an essence. And it is on the basis of the centre, he says, that the Church has grounds to hope for its own perdurance.

What might this centre be, if not a self-possessed ‘essence’? Ratzinger affirms this centre as ‘faith in the triune God’, God made know in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man—and in saying this he echoes Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi.

And this might put us in mind of another great New Testament image of the Church: that of the spouse of Christ. If the Church is forever, it is only because Christ is forever, and the Church is the object of Christ’s undying love.

I talked at the beginning of this sermon about how we humans strive towards our own forevers. We make marriage vows and ordination promises and various other solemn commitments. And we do really mean them. Often we manage to keep these vows, though invariably imperfectly. And sometimes we fail to.

Unlike us, though, Christ keeps his promises for ever. And here lies the Church’s hope: that Jesus Christ does not will to be without us. It is because of this unwavering covenant of love that we can affirm with no reservation that where Christ is, there the Church will be.

There is, therefore, a place for speaking for the Church as forever, but only because its true centre is not in itself, but outside itself. Its future lies in God’s regard for it, and the Spirit whose work in it is a token of a perfection that is yet to be fully accomplished.

What it will look like, on the other hand, is a very different matter, and may require—alongside theological conviction—both sociological realism and creative imagination. Perhaps something like the realism and the imagination of the Joseph Ratzinger of over half a century ago, whose words were radical then and seem even more acute now. Here he is again:

> It will be hard going for the Church, for the process of crystallization and clarification will cost her much valuable energy. It will make her poor and cause her to become the Church of the meek. The process will be all the more arduous, for sectarian narrow-mindedness as well as pompous self-will will have to be shed. One may predict that all of this will take time […] But when the trial of this sifting is past, a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church. Men in a totally planned world will find themselves unspeakably lonely. If they have completely lost sight of God, they will feel the whole horror of their poverty. Then they will discover the little flock of believers as something wholly new. They will discover it as a hope that is meant for them, an answer for which they have always been searching in secret.*[…]* [The Church] may well no longer be the dominant social power to the extent that she was until recently; but she will enjoy a fresh blossoming and be seen as man’s home, where he will find life and hope beyond death.

The Church has a ‘forever’ future not because of anything it can claim for itself, but because it is in touch with—because it is born out of—the truth of the divine life itself. The marks of this divine life are sacrifice and faithfulness. Its fruits in the Church are lives lived in generosity and trust. To live in any other way is to live against the grain of the universe. However plausible or rewarding other paths may seem to be for a time, they will ultimately fail.[1]

This path—the path found through incorporation in Christ’s true Church—is the path that leads to eternal life. This truth—the truth of the divine love, made known as sacrifice and faithfulness—is the truth that wells up in every sanctuary in the world, at every Christian altar, whenever people gather in Christ’s name and open themselves to his presence.

[1] Daniel W. Hardy talked of a dynamic in the world's life that he called 'sociopoesis' (in his final, 2010, book Wording a Radiance).

> Creatures have a capacity for being attracted and thus for being brought into relation with their creator. Not to be attracted is, against the direction of creation, to be enclosed in self-reference. To be attracted is to be drawn beyond oneself to God. It is also to be drawn to others throughout the order of creation. 'Sociopoesis'—the generation and shaping of relations—is not something that has to be fabricated. Sociopoesis operates in the divine, so that it is a dimension of all things always (Hardy, 2010: 49).