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A case of therapeutic preaching done well: Theological diagnostics in Von Balthasar's sermon, 'Joy in the Midst of Anxiety'

Author:
Neil F. Pembroke[1,2]

Affiliations:
[1]School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

[2]Department Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

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Corresponding author:
Neil Pembroke,
n.pembroke@uq.edu.au

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It is argued that the proper way to construct and deliver a therapeutic sermon is to take a theocentric approach. Preaching, rightly understood, is proclamation of the good news that God has redeemed the world through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is by definition theological. Feeling pressure to be relevant, engaging and contemporary, a significant number of preachers fall into administering mini-doses of psychological self-help from the pulpit. Hans Urs von Balthasar's homily, 'Joy in the Midst of Anxiety', is offered as a positive alternative. The sermon is theologically and homiletically analysed to show why it is an excellent example of theocentric therapeutic preaching.

Keywords: Therapeutic preaching; Balthasar; Theocentric, Homiletics; Pastoral preaching.

Introduction

Therapeutic preaching is a proclamation of the gospel that offers a theological diagnosis of (Capps 1980, 1984),[1] and pastoral intervention for, common existential, intrapsychic and interpersonal pathologies. There is a right way and a wrong way to go about this homiletic form. The faulty form of therapeutic preaching offers a diagnosis and a treatment plan that are drawn heavily from psychology. It is not that God, Christ and the Holy Spirit never get a mention; the problem is their relegation to the periphery of the discussion. Their role is to provide some theological respectability to what is largely a human-centred conversation (Long 2009:38) organised around psychological categories.

It is argued that the proper way to construct and deliver a therapeutic sermon is to take a theocentric approach. Preaching is rightly understood as a proclamation of the good news that God has redeemed the world through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is by definition theological. Feeling pressure to be relevant, engaging and contemporary, a significant number of preachers fall into administering mini-doses of psychological self-help from the pulpit. Their auditors are presented with a synopsis of some of the best wisdom that today's leading psychologists have to offer on overcoming anxiety and depression, dealing with stress in the workplace and having a happy and fulfilling marriage. All that is needed to turn pure, unalloyed psychological wisdom into a sermon is drawing a few connecting lines to the epistle or gospel of the day.

At this time, only a few helpful guides are available for those who seek to do theo- and Christocentric therapeutic preaching (see, e.g. Capps 2015; Nichols 1987; Pembroke 2012, 2013; Wimberley 1999). I aim to make a contribution to this relatively small body of literature by concentrating on the homiletic approach of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1989). The theology of Von Balthasar is Christocentric. However, this should not be taken to imply that the doctrine of the Trinity is suppressed. Von Balthasar's theological system is focussed on the person and work of Christ, but Christ's redemptive intervention is consistently presented as a Trinitarian event. Given the way Von Balthasar goes about his theology, it is natural for us to turn to his homilies in search of another helpful exemplar of theo- and Christocentric therapeutic preaching.

1.In *Pastoral counseling and preaching*, Capps shows how preaching and pastoral counselling involve the same fundamental pastoral moves, namely, identification of the problem, reconstruction of the problem, diagnosis and pastoral intervention. He goes on to identify six types of theological diagnosis that famous preachers have characteristically employed. In *Pastoral care and hermeneutics*, Capps suggests that these six types of theological diagnosis may be combined to make three diagnostic models: (1) the contextual model (based on the theological diagnoses of sermons by Wesley and Brooks), (2) the experiential model (based on the theological diagnoses of sermons by Tillich and Schleiermacher) and (3) the revisionist model (based on the theological diagnoses of sermons by Newman and Farrar) (pp. 62–66).

Note: HTS 75th Anniversary Maake Masango Dedication.

In his radio broadcast sermon entitled 'Joy in the Midst of Anxiety', Von Balthasar (1989:22–31) offers a penetrating theological diagnosis and a hopeful theological prescription. His theological diagnosis is that whatever historical and situational factors are associated with the widespread experience of anxiety in the modern world, the ultimate cause is standing apart from Christ and his offer of blessedness. The prescription that Von Balthasar gives has three parts: receive your life and your salvation as gifts from God; embrace the positive meaning in suffering and communicate your joy-in-Christ to the world.

This commentary on Von Balthasar's theological therapeutics in 'Joy in the Midst of Anxiety' is set out as follows. The first move is to set the context by discussing the seminal work on therapeutic preaching by Harry Emerson Fosdick (and his early followers) and the contemporary contribution of James Wallace.[2] A critical review of Fosdick's project of offering counselling 'on a group scale' is provided. In presenting the various critiques of the Riverside preacher's homiletic approach, the solution to the problem becomes evident: therapeutic preaching needs to be thoroughly theological. Secondly, a critical analysis of the 'imaginal preaching' approach of the Roman Catholic homiletician, Jim Wallace, is offered. We will see that in the end his approach is, like Fosdick's, anthropocentric. The final section of the essay is taken up with a discussion of Von Balthasar's proclamation of Christocentric therapy for anxiety. Firstly, there is a reflection on the theological diagnosis that he gives in accounting for the angst that many feel today. This is followed by an analysis of his theological approach to prescription. We begin, however, with a discussion of the groundbreaking homiletic approach of Harry Emerson Fosdick.

Back to the source of therapeutic preaching: Harry Emerson Fosdick's group counselling approach

Harry Emerson Fosdick famously stated that 'preaching can be personal consultation on a group scale' (1952:12). This was an idea that gained considerable traction among American Protestant preachers in the 20th century. In the fifties and sixties, when writers addressed the issue of preaching and pastoral care, it was this principle that usually guided their approach. For example, in his book, *Preaching and Pastoral Care*, Arthur Teikmanis states his conviction that 'dynamic preaching is basically pastoral care in the context of worship' (Teikmanis 1964:19). In a similar vein, Edgar Jackson, in writing on preaching to people's needs, declares that the sermon is 'an instrument of group therapy' (Jackson 1966:11). Fosdick recalls that what planted the seed of this new approach to preaching was a counselling experience with a young man 'from one of the church's finest families' who was in the grip of alcoholism. Fosdick (1952) tells the story this way:

> I recall my desperate feeling that if the gospel of Christ did not have in it available power to save that youth, of what use was it? When months of conference and inward struggle ended in triumph, when that young man said to me, 'If you ever find anyone who doesn't believe in God, send him to me – I know!' something happened to my preaching that courses in homiletics do not teach. *This* was the kind of effect that a *sermon* ought to have. It could deal with real problems, speak directly to individual needs, and because of it transforming consequences could happen to some person then and there. (p. 12)

For Fosdick, then, preaching the saving gospel of Christ is fundamentally about addressing *real* problems, aiming one's message at an individual need and expecting that lives will be transformed as a result. He chastises the topical preachers of his day for 'turning their pulpits into platforms and their sermons into lectures, straining after some new, intriguing subject …' (Fosdick 2004:11). In essence, the problem is that the topical preachers start 'at the wrong end'. They think first of their own ideas, when they should be thinking first of the people they will be preaching to. According to Fosdick, it is not a matter of coming up with a novel and intriguing topic to preach on, but rather of focusing one's mind on the real needs of the people in the congregation.

Fosdick offers his 'project method' as a superior approach. Linn (1966:15) offers the alternative designation, 'the counseling sermon', for this innovative approach. Even though the 'counseling' is offered to a group, it is nevertheless 'a conversational message from soul to soul' (Fosdick 2004:15). Such preaching is not simply the presentation of helpful information; it should have the power to bring renewal and healing to suffering and confused persons. That is to say, the goal of the counselling sermon is the transformation of persons. Fosdick (2004) puts it this way:

> The preacher should go into his pulpit expecting that lives will be made over, families will be saved, young people will be directed into wholesome paths, potential suicides will become happy and useful members of society, and doubters will become vibrant believers. (p. 16)

With our homiletic theme in mind, I have chosen Fosdick's focus on joy to illustrate his method (Fosdick 2004:16–17). He begins by contending that the preacher should not start with joy in the 5th century, nor should she or he think of joy as a subject for a lecture. Rather, the preacher needs to focus on the concrete difficulties that people face as they attempt to live joyfully. This means that she or he will co-operatively converse with her or his auditors on matters such as their mistaken ideas of joy, the reasons why joyful living is difficult for them to achieve and the problem of victorious living in the face of the stresses and challenges of modern living. But the truly helpful sermon is not simply a conversation about joy; it goes further and actually produces it. 'All powerful preaching is creative. It actually brings to pass in the lives of the congregation the thing it talks about' (Fosdick 2004:16).

2.For a similar treatment, see Pembroke 2012:239–244.

Fosdick is on target in his contention that an efficacious sermon does more than simply make some interesting observations about the particular human need being addressed. A real sermon has the potential to be transformative. Despite the strengths in his approach, the fundamental problem with Fosdick's approach is that it is insufficiently theological. In his doctoral thesis on the Fosdick method of preaching, Harry Black Beverly contends that his subject has forgotten that the central call upon the preacher is to proclaim the event of God's saving encounter with humankind in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (see Miller 1985:340–341). According to Beverly, Fosdick's message too often contained 'no gospel to solve man's problems; no message about the redemptive acts of God in history on man's behalf; no witness to Christ as Lord and Savior …' (Beverly 1965:cited in Miller 1985:340).

This loss of focus on God's redeeming work in Christ is the most common objection to Fosdick's method. Ramsey (2000) in his critique of the Riverside preacher, for example, avers that:

> [C]onstant attention in preaching to the particular needs of the hearers, while admittedly retaining listener appeal, obscures the truth that God's answer to human suffering is already and ever again given in Christ. (p. 16)

Graves (2004) laments the fact that too often preachers adopting a therapeutic approach fail to point their hearers to God's redeeming love. The focus is on human behaviour; *we* get placed at the centre of the preaching orbit:

> We forget, grammatically speaking, that even if the *object* of our proclamation, what Fosdick referred to as the 'main business', is to speak a relevant word to our listeners, God remains the *subject*. (Graves 2004:110)

To give one last example, Long (2004:150) contends that for Fosdick the real interest and action in preaching is using the gospel to solve personal problems, when it is really about giving the news that because of what happened in the Christ event life can never be the same again.

It is very evident what the problem is. Therapeutic preaching that follows the Fosdick line is defective because of its anthropic focus. The solution is equally obvious. Preaching that is faithful to the gospel and seeks to provide genuine help to auditors in dealing with their existential, developmental, emotional and interpersonal issues is centred on the redemptive action of God in Christ.

We have been discussing the therapeutic approach of an influential Protestant preacher. We turn our attention now to that of a leading Catholic homiletician, James Wallace.

Wallace's imaginal preaching

In his book, *Imaginal Preaching*, James Wallace acknowledges the influence of the work of James Hillman in *Insearch: Psychology and Religion*. He recognises that the importance Hillman attaches to 'soul-work' has implications for preaching (Wallace 1995:3). The psychotherapist has shown him the importance of care for the soul that is grounded in 'a psycho-spiritual appreciation for the cultivation of the imagination' (Wallace 1995:3).

In developing his approach to care for the soul from the pulpit, Wallace makes use of Hillman's archetypal psychology. According to Wallace (1995), Hillman thinks of images as 'manifestations of the soul' (p. 22). Archetypal psychology works with its own particular understanding of soul. Most of us think of the soul as the innermost dimension of the self, that spiritual principle that animates us and produces our self-understanding. 'But in the world of archetypal psychology, soul is identified not with spirit but with the sphere of psyche, and psyche is concerned with imagination and heart' (Wallace 1995:22). Care of the soul has to do with cultivating the images that arise out of our personal depths. Preachers, suggests Wallace, have the primary responsibility for caring for the images of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Stimulated by Hillman's thinking, he construes the preacher as someone who holds up the seminal images in the tradition to help people live 'soul-full' lives through sermons that are 'biblically grounded and experientially relevant' (Wallace 1995:23). Weaving gospel images is a powerful way to awaken the soul:

> The preacher's responsible crafting of the images preserved in the biblical texts is one way to overturn the loss of soul found even in the world of religion. Through crafted images sown into the consciousness of a community, soul can be awakened, cultivated, and engaged. (Wallace 1995:34)

Wallace turns to the archetypes associated with three Greek mythical characters – Apollo, Dionysius and Hermes – to inform his imaginal preaching method. He notes that myth is the 'primary rhetoric' of archetypal psychology (Wallace 1995:28). The three mythic patterns are as follows. The Apollonian emphases, first, are order, balance and harmony (Wallace 1995:63). The Dionysian modalities are the feminine, the world of matter and 'mystical madness' (Wallace 1995:84). The Hermetic roles, lastly, are 'the guide and messenger, the trickster and thief, the traveler and companion, the whisperer of night and day dreams' (Wallace 1995:102).

Wallace's contention is that these mythic figures express the universal patterns that are innate to the psyche. The obvious objection to this approach is that it is inappropriate to use Greek mythology to inform a practice that is grounded in a Hebraic consciousness. Wallace (1995) responds in this way:

> I would propose that just as the great contribution of the Hebraic mind was to delineate the first and subsequent stirrings of the revelation of the God revealed in the experience of Israel and then most fully in Jesus of Nazareth and to provide in the books of the Bible an imaginal map of the reality of covenant with this God, so the contribution of Greek mythology was to offer one useful delineation of the various aspects of the human psyche through its figures of the gods and goddesses, charting the territory of the soul and naming its various ways of being in the world. (p. 29)

After surveying Wallace's sermons, it is evident that he is very gifted in the art of crafting a liturgical address. I found myself being engaged, inspired and challenged by his sermons. Nonetheless, I feel compelled to register a concern over the way he sometimes uses his images. Wallace (1995) avers that:

> [*O*]ne can move to crafting a homily that features the images of the text while allowing them to be reworked by one's own imagination and amplified by the images of one's own experience. (p. 71)

He takes full advantage of the hermeneutic liberty that this sentence expresses. It seems that sometimes he allows his imagination to run quite a distance from the text that he is preaching on. The sermon that particularly stands out for me in this regard is based on the gospel passage in which the angel rolls the stone away from the tomb (Mt 28:1–10). Wallace's theme is this: 'The rock is whatever prevents us from entering the tomb, from dying and being buried with Christ'. Below is an extract from the sermon:

> What is my stone? Our stone?
> Secrets that keep us nailed to a cross.
> Secret abuse we perform or tolerate or ignore.
> Secret judgments on which we build our lives, judgments that size up, diminish, and dismiss others.
> Secret hatreds and prejudices … (Wallace 1995:72)

This is clearly a very creative approach. The image of the stone that blocks the way to Easter life is indeed a powerful one. However, the concern I have is that Wallace's play with the scriptural image shifts the spotlight from God's action to our human problems and moral failures. Taking note also of the central role that Wallace gives to the three archetypal psychic patterns, it is clear that he has the same general anthropic orientation that we saw in Fosdick.

I am drawn to Von Balthasar's homiletic approach because he addresses central human needs and problems through theo- and Christocentrism. To illustrate this, I offer an analysis of the theological diagnosis and prescription that he offers in his sermon, 'Joy in the Midst of Anxiety'.

Theological diagnosis in the sermon

To set the scene for his theological diagnosis, Von Balthasar reflects on the historical and situational factors that have led to anxiety rather than joy being the all-pervasive mood of many in the modern world. He notes, first, that in this era in which humans have a grasp of the enormity of the universe, we feel lonelier than ever. There is also the deeply troubling awareness that we have very limited resources on this planet teeming with people, and they are running out. Life for many feels uncertain and insecure in the face of bombs falling, hostages being taken, and violence and terror being perpetrated. Finally, there is a widespread sense of futility and meaninglessness associated with the experience of being a very small part in a vast socio-economic machine that we have no control over, little understanding of, and very little affection for. Von Balthasar (1989) offers this sad reflection:

> So many people have become cogs in a machine, people whose future, like their past and present, is totally planned, people in social systems that they hate, people – and how many there are – who simply lack the minimum for survival. (p. 27)

We find an expanded treatment of the problem of anxiety by Von Balthasar in his book *The Christian and Anxiety* (Von Balthasar 2000). To get a full sense of how he interprets angst in that book and in his sermon, it is necessary to give attention to the classic existentialist approaches.

Martin Heidegger interpreted *angst* as an all-pervasive feeling or mood [*Gefühl*] that has no object. It is therefore quite different to the experience of fear. Fear is associated with a specific object. The object of one's fear may be a disease, poverty or an armed assailant. A person gripped by *angst*, on the other hand, is unable to point to any concrete entity as the cause of the distressing mood she is experiencing. *Angst* for Heidegger is literally an encounter with nothing or nothingness.

In and through the experience of *angst*, a person loses her world. An all-pervasive feeling of dread or anxiety arises when the world that is usually experienced as familiar and comfortable begins to feel strange, alien and uncanny. According to Heidegger, the person gripped by *angst* feels disconnected or estranged from her world. The ordinary relations with things and other people that constitute her familiar and comfortable universe now feel anything but ordinary. The German word for 'uncanny' is *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* can also be translated as 'weird', 'scary' or 'eerie'. *Angst* is an all-pervasive mood of disconnection from the world that is the home we were 'thrown' into at birth. We never feel fully at home during our journey through life; human existence has a weird and alien feel to it.

The 'nothingness' that Heidegger locates at the centre of the experience of *angst* is interpreted by Paul Tillich in his theological reflection as non-being. Tillich (1951) observes that humans know that they lack the 'aseity' attributed to God. They are not the ground of their own being; they know themselves to be contingent rather than necessary beings. Humans therefore live always under the threat of non-being. The human person lives in the shadow of the inescapable reality that is death. Sartre includes in non-being not only the threat of nothingness, but also the spectre of meaninglessness. Tillich avers that existentialist analyses such as these show that '[*the human's*] finitude, or creatureliness is unintelligible without the concept of dialectical nonbeing' (Tillich 1952:189). Associated with the ever-present possibility of non-being is a deep, underlying anxiety. It is not possible to cure oneself of this anxiety. As we have just seen, existential angst is different from psychological fear. Fear can be dealt with through some form of action. But there is no action that can remove the threat of non-being. The human therefore needs the 'courage

to be'. That is, she needs the courage to accept the dread and anxiety that cannot be eliminated.

Von Balthasar, of course, accepts that this ontological form of anxiety is very real for many people today, but his analysis centres on what the American pastoral theologian, Kirk Bingaman, refers to as 'the new anxiety' (Bingaman 2010). According to Bingaman, this new form of anxiety is associated with 'historical particularities'. It is very common for people today to be gripped by a mood of anxiety over the state of the economy, the nation and the world, insecurity in employment, the level of retirement income and the well-being of family and children. In both his book and his sermon, Von Balthasar similarly focuses on the particularities of the contemporary historical epoch. Indeed, Bingaman (2010) makes this observation:

> [*T*]he Swiss theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar has linked anxiety with the human condition in the modern world, suggesting that every human being living today is experiencing, to one degree or another, some form of anxiety. In certain ways, Von Balthasar's argument is similar to my own, in that to be alive in the modern world is to feel anxious. (p. 663)

To further develop his argument, Bingaman (2010) quotes from *The Christian and Anxiety*:

> The particular case is the anxiety of modern man in a mechanized world with colossal machinery inexorably swallows up the frail human body and mind only to refashion it into a cog in the machinery – machinery that thus becomes as meaningless as it is all-consuming – the anxiety of man in a civilization that has destroyed all human sense of proportion and that can no longer keep its own demons at bay. (Von Balthasar 2000:35–36; cited in Bingaman 2010:663)

The 'cog in the machinery' metaphor, as we saw above, also appears in the sermon. Von Balthasar observes that the end result is a profoundly anxiety-producing experience of feeling trapped in a vast, out-of-control, socio-economic system that ultimately has no meaning.

The consequence of anxiety taking over in a person's life is that 'joy, in a profound, all-embracing and buoyant sense, has become perhaps the rarest article and raw material in today's world' (Von Balthasar 1989:26). It is this deep, all-pervasive joy that is precisely the gift that Christ offers to the world. Drawing on his Scriptural text – the Lukan Beatitudes – Von Balthasar announces that the person who is in Christ and receptive of his saving grace, no matter what her personal situation, or the state of her family, community or nation, lives in a state of blessedness. The *eu-angelion* is not an announcement of many things with joy simply being one of them; it is 'quite simply *joy*' (Von Balthasar 1989:27). Taking all this into account, Von Balthasar's theological diagnosis is essentially this: While the distressing personal, historical and social particularities that a person finds herself subject to explain on one level why she is experiencing deep anxiety, the ultimate cause is a failure to unite – either at all or fully – with Christ and thus to lose the gift of fully human joy that he offers to those who come to him in faith.

Theological diagnosis is obviously only the first step in a therapeutic sermon. It is also necessary to provide a theological prescription. It is to a discussion of Von Balthasar's presentation of a gospel treatment that we now turn.

Theological prescription in the sermon: Inoculation with the joy of Christ

There are three commonly employed medical treatments. The first is excision. In a surgical procedure, the diseased tissue or organ is removed. Von Balthasar (1989:76–81) makes use of this metaphor in his sermon entitled 'Bought at a Great Price'. In reflecting on the fact that on the cross Christ has borne the load of human sin and thereby taken it from us, he plays with two images of excision. He begins by suggesting that Christ's action on our behalf could be compared to the work of the surgeon in removing an organ. But he quickly dismisses this and says that it is more a case of an excision of a spreading cancer.

A second medical treatment that we are all very familiar with is injection of a drug. The drug is effective for a certain period of time, but if the condition persists, further injections will be required.

Last on my list, though not the last in the list of all possible medical therapies, is inoculation. As I write, the influenza season is well underway and many people are choosing to go to a doctor to get their annual 'flu shot'.

Von Balthasar's theological prescription fits into the inoculation category. Anxiety is not like a diseased piece of tissue or organ that can be surgically removed. Likewise, joy is not a drug that Christ injects the faithful with as needed to keep anxiety under control. Rather, the therapy that he announces is inoculation against anxiety. Von Balthasar obviously does not mean that a Christian filled with the joy of Christ will never have times of feeling anxious. Feeling 'on edge' from time to time is part of the human condition. God's grace is not like a heavy dose of Valium. Having received this dose, a person simply cannot work himself or herself up into a state of anxiety no matter what confronts him or her. Recall the type of anxiety that Von Balthasar concerns himself with in his sermon. It is all-pervasive, deep-seated anxiety that is associated with a fall into a pit of meaninglessness and despair. It is against this disease that Christ successfully inoculates those who come to him in faith. Von Balthasar proclaims that when a person is truly in Christ she will experience 'joy that finds life, with all its difficulties, reversals, threats and disappointments, to be ultimately good and worth living' (Von Balthasar 1989:27).

Von Balthasar (1989) identifies three facets of the diamond that is joy-in-Christ. The first is participation through faith in the divine life of self-giving. In creating the world and in redeeming humankind from sin, God gives a precious gift.

We have received our world and our salvation from the hand of God. The deepest truth is not that we have received certain things, namely, our world and reconciliation with God. It is rather that we have received the gift of God's very self (Von Balthasar 1998). Von Balthasar (1998) expresses this beautifully: '[*T*]he gift which is offered is indeed truly the crystallized (and at the same time liquefied) love of the giver: God in the form of his given-ness' (pp. 14–15).

It is giving-of-self-in-love that constitutes the eternal blessedness of the triune God. God the Father is the primal source of all that is and he gives his all, from all eternity, to the Son. The 'complete bliss' of the Father and the Son is to return the gift each has received in and through the Holy Spirit, who is God as sheer gift.

The human person is the prime beneficiary of the self-giving love of the triune God. She is a gift of God to herself. In giving humans the gift of life, God also gives the ineffable gift of a share in the eternal, blessed life of God. The one who comes to Christ in faith lives in blessedness because she or he is gifted with participation in the blessed communion that is the life of God.

The second aspect in the divine gift of joy that von Balthasar announces in his sermon is the positive meaning that Christian faith gives to suffering. The most obvious reference point in this regard is the vicarious suffering of Christ on the cross. On Calvary, Jesus took upon himself the fundamental cause of human sadness and hopelessness, namely, our sin and guilt. In this definitive act of redemptive suffering, Christ 'open[*ed*] up for us the path to unreserved joy' (Von Balthasar 1989:30). Elsewhere, Von Balthasar (1986) refers to the 'pure joy' of the Easter event as 'objective, not primarily individual or psychological' (p. 99). This constitutes affirmation of the point I made above, that for Von Balthasar the Christian can fully trust in the gift of joy in the face of the threats, disappointments, failures and uncertainties that are part and parcel of life in the modern world. Like an inoculation shot that prevents a disease, the pure joy that comes with the grace of Easter can be relied on to ward off the sickness of meaninglessness and hopelessness.

Von Balthasar employs a vivid metaphor to underscore this crucially important point. He establishes a connection with the mighty act of Samson in lifting the gates of the city of Gaza from their hinges and carrying them away: 'Jesus unhinged the far more heavily bolted gates of our perdition and, on Easter morning, set us free to walk down the path into God's broad landscape' (Von Balthasar 1989:30).

Von Balthasar (1989) reflects that just as Christ was abandoned by God so that God's redemptive grace could abound in the world, it is inevitable that we will also experience times of abandonment. In another place, Von Balthasar (1987) makes this important and related observation: Life for the Christian is not 'a case of simple alternation of joy and suffering', and neither:

> [*C*]an there be any question of relativizing the Cross as a result of Easter joy, for the Christian's discipleship can enter the dark night of the Spirit, not only mystically but in the many kinds of *desolatio.* (p. 169)

In a limited human vision, such suffering may be viewed as futile and senseless, but the wondrous truth of the gospel is that it has a positive meaning. 'Even suffering, *particularly* suffering, is a precious gift that the one suffering can hand on to others; it helps, it purifies, it atones, it communicates divine graces' (Von Balthasar 1989:30). It is interesting to note that the same idea is expressed in *Engagement with God*:

> [*The Christian*] ought to receive [*the gift of joy*] as grace from God. For himself alone, however? Surely he receives it just as much, perhaps even more so in order that he may share it and hand it on to others. (Von Balthasar 1986:100)

To illustrate this idea, Von Balthasar refers in his sermon to the case of a mother's suffering being the event that stops a wayward son in his tracks and leads him to turn his life around. He also identifies the positive meaning in suffering from a serious illness as the opportunity to offer it to God as 'capital for God to use' (Von Balthasar 1989:30).

The final point that Von Balthasar makes in his reflection is that the joy that Christ so generously and lovingly gives to the faithful is not meant to be hoarded and selfishly clung onto. This precious gift from God is not something artificially produced; it is the genuine article. God's intention is for the pure joy God gives in and through Christ to be passed on to a world caught in the grip of darkness and despair. Joy shared with others is joy magnified and expanded. In all this, Jesus is the prime exemplar:

> No one has transformed the world more profoundly than Jesus Christ … Through this joy of his he raised the level of joy in the world. His love and joy come from afar, from the deepest wellsprings of eternal Being; he communicates them to those who are his, not hesitantly and sparingly, but in all fullness … (Von Balthasar 1989:31)

Conclusion

Genuinely therapeutic preaching is much more than dressing up self-help psychology with a bit of biblical language. To be faithful to the gospel and truly efficacious, this form of preaching needs to be theo- and Christocentric. Auditors suffering from various existential, developmental, emotional and interpersonal issues are best helped by a confident, faithful and clear announcement of God's saving work through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. In a word, therapeutic preaching needs to be thoroughly theological. This does not mean that relevant insights from psychology or philosophy should be ignored; when used judiciously, they can be very helpful. The point is that divine grace and action, not human wisdom, is the focus of a genuinely therapeutic sermon.

Noting that there are relatively few exemplars of theocentric therapeutic preaching currently available, Von Balthasar's

radio sermon on joy in the midst of anxiety was offered. I suggested that the theological diagnosis he offers in his sermon is this: While the distressing personal, historical, and social particularities that a person finds herself subject to explain on one level why she is experiencing deep anxiety, the ultimate cause is a failure to unite – either at all or fully – with Christ and thus to lose the gift of fully human joy that he offers to those who come to him in faith. His theological prescription has three parts: receive your life and your salvation as gifts from God; embrace the positive meaning in suffering and communicate your joy-in-Christ to the world.

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Competing interest

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Author contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability statement

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Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for carrying out research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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