

A person in a dark jacket and pants is walking away from the camera on a dirt path that winds through a vast, hazy, mountainous landscape. The terrain is rocky and the sky is overcast, creating a sense of solitude and journey.

# AN unlikely MESSAGE

## Virtue and the Jordan Peterson phenomenon

BY PETER GILMORE

The lights dim on a sold-out auditorium packed with eager fans. When the tickets went on sale for the Australian tour, all the venues were sold out in an astonishing five minutes. And these are not bargain-basement prices—the premium seats will set you back \$150. So, who is this rockstar? What pop sensation is causing all this fuss? As he takes the stage, there's no fanfare or flashing lights. There's no band. He's going to speak and answer impromptu questions for three hours. That's it. That's the “show”, and people can't seem to get enough of it.

Dr Jordan B Peterson is an enigma in the modern age of short-lived attention spans and passing fads. For a solid four months, his book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, has been on most best-seller lists. Over the last few years, his university psychology lectures on *YouTube* have been getting millions of views and they're not introductory courses—they're dense, complex and, shockingly, life-altering. Perhaps, most surprising of all, is his 15-part biblical lecture series on the book of Genesis. Each lecture, which discusses the deep human significance of the stories contained within, clocks in at over two and a half hours, and despite not even identifying as a Christian, the average viewership is in the hundreds of thousands.



## Why does any of this matter?

It matters because his central message is reverberating across the world like an ancient discarded drum rediscovered whilst scouring the junk heap of history—the junk heap that has swallowed up such crucial ideas as the power of forgiveness, the centrality of the family in society, and even the awful truth that we are all capable of doing terrible things given the right circumstances, the right environment and the right motivation.

What's the message? What is the drum beat that is calling the young and old, the educated and non-educated, the affluent and those who are struggling? It's simple. Clean up your room. Tell the truth, or at least, don't lie. Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping. Be precise in your speech. And, possibly most confronting of all, life is hard. Life is very hard, but we need to, in his words, "Pick up your damn cross and walk up the hill." Shoulder whatever burden you can and carry it. That, Peterson says, is "truly heroic". That is what gives life meaning.

An unpopular message to give. A hard message to receive. An even harder message to live.

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## The pursuit of virtue

But, this message isn't unique. For two millennia, these messages have been the song sung by the Church over the Catholic faithful and the world at large: "Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8). And not just think about them like a car with its engine in neutral—all noise but no motion. We need to do something. Become the people God

created us to be. Our Church tells us, "A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 1803).

Ultimately, "The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God" (St Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*, 1: PG 44, 1200D). This sense of purpose is an echo of ancient Greek philosophy. Aristotle said that our purpose as human beings is happiness or fulfilment, and that is found in virtue.

To Aristotle, virtue was realising our potential. How can we know our potential if we aim only at where we are in our journey rather than where we could be?

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in popularity of Jordan Peterson. We crave the truth, no matter how blunt or difficult it is for us to swallow or for the shepherds of our flock to teach.” He concludes his letter by saying, “Many of us feel that we’re the rightful heirs of thousands of years of rich teaching, tradition, art, architecture and music. We young Catholics increasingly recognise that these riches will be crucial for evangelising our peers and passing on a thriving Church to our children. If the Church abandons her traditions of beauty and truth, she abandons us.”

## The pursuit of perfect

As Catholics, we have so much to offer the world. The best of which is not the idea of being perfect, but rather, the pursuit of perfect—God. It’s the pursuit of the good, the true and the beautiful which the world is thirsting for. And, our beliefs as Catholics—hard as they are to live—are the living core of this. In the romantic comedy, *Keeping the Faith* (2000), Edward Norton’s character, Fr Brian, has this conversation with his friend, Rabbi Jake:

**Rabbi Jake:** Jews want their rabbis to be the kind of Jews they don’t have the time to be.

**Fr Brian:** Yeah, and Catholics want their priests to be the kind of Catholics they don’t have the discipline to be.

None of us are perfect. We all fall short. We all get it wrong. As St Teresa of Kolkata said, “God doesn’t ask that we succeed in everything, but that we are faithful.” As our mother, the Church sets a high bar for us in her teaching, as she should. Not to punish us, but, with God’s grace, to draw out the best in us and to bring the kingdom of God to Earth.

## David and Goliath

Is Jordan Peterson right about everything? No, he’s human just like the rest of us. So, what can we learn from this phenomenon? Let us face down the giant, the Goliath, and like David, with God’s strength, be victorious! However, perhaps the discovery will be, the giant is me and the victor in this story is the person who God created me to be. ■

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## The two great lies

We, with all our modern trappings and sophistications, suffer from the results of two insidious lies.

The *first* is that the unconditional love of God and being made in his image are incompatible with the need to pursue our best selves, or, as the Church would call it, “sainthood”. We give out participation awards, we remove the possibility of last place by declaring everyone a winner, and we refuse to say the hard things for fear of hurt egos and wounded pride. What is there left to do when you are already made perfect? It would seem nothing. I *just* have a bad temper. I *just* can’t help this vice or that. I *just* am who I am, which sounds eerily like God’s proclamation to Moses—I am who I am. Except, we aren’t God.

The *second* lie is that we have allowed ourselves to become infected with the moral relativism of post-modernist theory—“I have *my* truth, you have *your* truth, there is no *the* truth.” And under this motto, we have all sorts of justifications why some law, rule or teaching doesn’t apply to us—*my* truth obviously trumps *the* truth. We stay silent and we rationalise ourselves out of sharing our faith because, “This is good for me and what they believe is good for them.” But, didn’t Christ declare himself to be “*the Way, the Truth and the Life*”? (John 14:6) This doesn’t mean an arrogant, forceful and unloving evangelism. Quite the contrary. The truth that we are loved, called, saved and given the grace to pursue our purpose, should lead us to singing and dancing in the streets. As

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C.S. Lewis said, “Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important” (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*).

## An unlikely audience

Many would think that 56-year-old Peterson’s rise to fame would be fuelled by an older generation, perhaps stuck in old ways of thinking, not adapted to the modern-day world. On the contrary, his largest audience is by far the typical university age person—young, not quite stepping into the responsibility of adulthood and finally discovering for themselves what living in the world looks like. This goes against every negative stereotype of the modern young person—lazy, not willing to shoulder personal responsibility, absorbed in self, and constantly bathed in the glow of some device or another. Archbishop Charles Chaput OFM of Philadelphia, recently wrote an article where he highlighted a letter he received from a parishioner in his diocese. This young parent wrote to the bishop, “We young people crave the truth and clarity of good teaching. On a secular level, this is evidenced by the meteoric rise