

Some words for our Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour Introduction - At the foot of the Cross

*'At the Cross her station keeping,
stood the mournful Mother weeping,
close to Jesus to the last.'*¹



Reading:
John 19:25-27

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

Each year on, 15th September, the gospel reading of Mary stood at the foot of the cross is offered to us for the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. At the moment, many of us feel powerless in a time of global tribulation and separation. As we commence our novena, which this year contemplates the *Seven Sorrows of Mary*, let us begin by pondering Mary's greatest trial: her helplessness in the face of the execution of her son.

As a Jewish woman Mary had no place or power to set against the authority of the Roman governor, Pilate. Possessing no public voice and about to lose a significant means of physical protection and support – it is not just for reason of rich theological or metaphorical nuance that Jesus bequeaths the care of his mother to the young St John – Mary is completely powerless. Restrained from even touching her son until

after his death she is left, at the foot of the cross, with that most simple and yet at times most extraordinarily difficult task; Mary must simply watch and wait.

Just because we possess no power to change something does not mean, for most of us surely, that we can watch and wait passively or inactively, especially when having to endure watching the suffering of those we love. Seeking relief, finding it impossible to escape from our emotions, many of us would become agitated or pace up and down, while others would perhaps rage and vent with visible, violent physical expression. Wouldn't Mary have experienced the usual agonies that such circumstances would give rise to? Would she not have felt the pain of every step and blow, the physical revulsion and horror of the crucifixion, and finally, the terror of watching her child expire before her eyes? She is a mother, not a spectator; she would have felt everything. At the same time, the restless pain and turmoil would be relentlessly repeating the usual useless questions; *Why? Why him? Why me? Why is this happening? Couldn't he have done it a different way? Perhaps if I'd...? What can I do?* And so on and so on...

To speak of 'being at the foot of the cross' can conjure up an image of something static and orderly, somehow making things seem quite calm and civilised; it is certain that they were not. In the Christian tradition Jesus accepts his fate, as the scriptures say he must and Mary, though a mother facing the death of her son, is portrayed as being accepting of his terrible purpose. Affirming this truth though must not let us sanitise or sterilise the sufferings of Mary, together with her son.

We revere Mary's acceptance of the way of her son precisely because, weak and powerless as she is at the hour of his death, and undoubtedly filled with anguish and the almost unbearable pain of her love; she nonetheless remains faithful. Her compassion, her suffering with her son, is as real as that awful act of faithful love that she must now endure: that the place she least wanted to be was also the place she most wanted to be, for how could she leave him? To believe you have glimpsed in the extraordinary birth and life of your son the hand of God and then see it all come to this must have been devastating. Yet, clinging on to a hope, with nothing left to give, and well past the point of human reason or understanding, Mary stays true to her path. '*Do whatever he tells you,*'² she once advised others, and following him by way of love to the cross is precisely what Mary now did. Privileged though she was as Mother of God, Mary still had to trust her son, to have faith that this was indeed the right path and that what she was witnessing and experiencing was the exaltation of the '*lowly*'³ and the '*mindful mercy*'⁴ of God. What we witness at the foot

of the cross is not acceptance won by comprehension but acceptance countenanced by love.

As we today watch and wait for good news let us emulate the enduring faith of Mary and seek her intercession for our needs and the needs of our world.

*'Joyful Mother, full of gladness,
in your arms your Lord was borne.
Mournful Mother, full of sadness,
all your heart with pain was torn.
Glorious Mother, now rewarded
with a crown at Jesus' hand,
age to age your name recorded
shall be blest in every land'⁵*

Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, *pray for us.*

St Joseph, *pray for us.*

St Charles Borromeo, *pray for us.*

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

28 April 2020

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1. *Stabat Mater*, tr. Edward Caswall, d. 1878
 2. *John* 2:5
 3. *Luke* 1:52
 4. *Luke* 1:54
 5. *Sing of Mary, pure and lowly*, verse 5, R.F. Palmer, d.1985