

Some words for our Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour Week 5 - The Meeting of Jesus and Mary on the Way of the Cross

*'Frail is our nature, and strict our probation,
watchful the foe that would lure us to wrong,
succour our souls in the hour of temptation,
Mary immaculate tender and strong.'*¹



Reading:

John 19:17-22

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

Our reading today is, for a Christian, the hinge upon which the whole of history turns. Given its cosmic significance it is a remarkably concise report. Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, is crucified. To the narratives of planetary creation and geology, evolution and biology, the Christian will henceforth add those of salvation and redemption. We proclaim that the Lord has won for us the opportunity to enjoy life beyond the horizon of physics. Yet the journey to the place of the skull is barely mentioned and the act of crucifixion, well known to the subjugated subjects of Rome,

is recorded in an almost cursory manner by St John. Such is the way that it so often is with matters of great moment.

While the gospels do record the assistance of Simon of Cyrene in helping our Lord to carry his cross,² the presence of Mary, his mother, is only inferred. We know Mary stood at the foot of the Cross with St John.³ So, unless she decided to skip the journey of her son, and head on up to Calvary and await events there, it seems to me that Catholic tradition is psychologically valid. That is to say, no matter how unbearable, and finding herself unable to swap places, she still would have wanted to be with her son and accompany his final painful steps as most mothers would. All the time, she would perhaps have been praying and hoping for a miracle and for the nightmare suddenly to end.

Mary would not have been alone of course. First there would have been the crowd, the mob, baying for her son's blood. We tend to forget how executions used to be, and still are in many places in the world, public affairs. Those in control have often sought the sanction of death to publically demonstrate their ultimate power to punish. People were far more accustomed to pain in those days and though our society is not to so outwardly brutish, we can still catch sight of a crowd's delight in the misfortune of another. After all, no matter how hard your life was, you could always walk away from an execution feeling better about yourself; they had it coming didn't they? Shoved and jostled, pushed and pulled along by the pack, Mary would have heard all the abuse and mockery, and seen something of the assault and torture that her son had undergone.

Despite the abject performance of most of the disciples there were still others around of course. The Lord had not been entirely abandoned. St John must have been nearby and St Luke speaks of how *'the women who had come from Galilee with Jesus were following behind.'*⁴ We also have recorded, Mary's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joset and, finally, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, possibly the same or a different woman named Salome.⁵ I like to think of these people forming a small cohort, that supported and surrounded Our Lady, and thereby at least shielded her from some of the worst excesses of the mob. However, even the solicitude and compassion of her family and friends would still, at heart, have left Mary alone.

As the mother of Jesus, Mary's suffering would have had a unique feeling that day. She would have walked every faltering step in her son's shoes and every blow that struck him would have reverberated within her own body also. The words of the

crowd, unquestionably crude and vulgar one moment, sharp and funny the next, would ring and sting for her like no one else. Nobody would experience the Passion of her son quite like her. Only she knew the feelings of his birth and could recall how it had been to carry and suckle him, allowing him to take his first stumbling steps, teaching him to speak, and watching him mature and grow. How painful must have been the beauty of her son for her to bear? A beauty that, by then disfigured by torture, no one else could see. All the while of course, the end was getting nearer and the exquisite torment of time running out would have assailed Mary also.

At the heart of Mary's sorrow is that particular suffering born of love. Here, the mother must endure the evident torture and torment of her son and confront his impending execution; all the while helpless and powerless to challenge or change things. Her one choice is whether to stay or go. All of us have a breaking point. Watching your beloved child, in this case a son innocent of any crime, undergo the cruelty Jesus would have experienced must be somewhere near the limit. Remember, the deliberate infliction of pain and agony was part of the show. It was not for nothing that some found the realism of Mel Gibson's 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ*, difficult to stomach. Such is her unselfish love that Mary overcomes the maelstrom of her own emotions and the anguish and revulsion that must have threatened at times to overwhelm her. Her love means that, not wanting any of this, she must stay, as best she is able, and hold to the one thing she does want, that she wants above all else, to stay by the side of her son.

I spoke earlier of Mary possibly praying for a miracle, for the whole thing to just end, and I am sure that in part she probably did. However, I am uncertain, because it might equally be true to wonder if she were not simply repeating over and over a simple mantra, much-loved by her son, '*Thy will be done!*'⁶ or some other prayer of abandonment to or acceptance of the divine will? Long before, at the very beginning of this road Mary had prayed, '*Let what you have said be done to me,*'⁷ and while I do not picture her at all serene and unmoved on the *via Dolorosa* I do hope that 'full of grace' she somehow discerned something of her son's hope and design for the world. Mary had a unique relationship with God and in her maternal suffering took a particular share in the Passion of her son. To do this she must have possessed some understanding, however limited, however awful the consequences, and I can only hope she knew a moment of consolation between the roar of the crowd and the silent desolation of her heart. In the end, she offered herself to her son, accepting that it be done his way, not her way. When the Lord stretched out his arms to embrace us all

and they nailed him to the Cross, his mother Mary took her place emotionally and spiritually beside him.

One of the saddest aspects of our current global pandemic has been the separation forced upon families, particularly at the hour of death. Powerless and helpless even during more normal times, more often than not, all we have to offer is our presence. However dark and difficult the challenge, Mary faced her sorrow and remained present. Sometimes, not even that is possible, and all we have left to offer is the accompaniment of our prayer. Jesus once asked his disciples, '*can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?*'⁸ Mary did, she drank the deep draught of her devotion, a full measure of the sacrificial love of her Immaculate Heart, and thereby offered to us in our need, and at the hour of our death, the comfort of her maternal intercession and the abiding presence of her son.

*'Deep night hath come down on this rough-spoken world.
And the banners of darkness are boldly unfurled;
And the tempest-tossed Church, all her eyes are on thee.
They look to thy shining, sweet Star of the Sea.'*⁹

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

26 May 2020

The picture is of *The Road to Calvary*, Pietro Lorenzetti, 1280-1348, Lower Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi

1. *Mary immaculate, star of the morning*, verse 4, F W Weatherell

2. *Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21 & Luke 23:26*

3. *John 19:25*

4. *Luke 23:55*

5. *Matthew 27:55-56, Mark 15:40 & John 19:25*

6. *Matthew 6:10*

7. *Luke 1:38*

8. *Matthew 20:22*

9. *O purest of creatures!*, Verse 2, F. W. Faber (1814-63)