

Some words for our Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour Week 6 - The Crucifixion

*'For the sins of his own nation, saw him hang in desolation,
till his spirit forth he sent.'*¹



Reading:

John 19:18-30

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

As a priest, you will perhaps not be surprised to learn, that I have been in the presence of a number of people who have died. The exact moment, when we pass from life to death, is still debated by philosophy and law, medicine and science, as indeed are the concepts of life and death also. I have noticed how somebody can immediately sense and pronounce someone has 'gone,' while others, whole families even, seem unsure if it has finally 'happened.' If the gulf between the two states of life and death remains unbridgeable and unknowable one thing is certain, one moment, no matter how tenuous, we are alive, and in another moment, we are not. Despite the physical distance and constraints imposed by the crucifixion – this was no family around the bedside death – I picture Mary as being one of those who recognised the moment when it came, and her son *'bowed his head and gave up his spirit.'*²

All Christians are called to look upon Jesus dying on the cross and behold the love of God. Taught from childhood to make the sign of the cross, and familiar with the cross or the crucifix in our prayers, homes and churches, we can perhaps become all too at ease with this instrument of torture and death. Sanitised and domesticated, it is a testimony to the teaching handed down to us that, for the most part, we look upon the cross and think primarily of God's love. This is right and proper, it is what the Lord would have wanted, but understanding this truth should not allow us to forget that not everyone sees it this way and some do not see it at all. There are people who attend the service of The Lord's Passion on Good Friday who find "the whole cross thing difficult" and some who choose not to face it by staying away. Many non-believers cannot get past why a father would do that to his son and reject the whole notion as disgusting, never perhaps considering that the son was a willing participant and that together, they were teaching us about the mystery of the love of God. Mystics, monks and hermits might have given decades of their lives to contemplating this mystery but can anyone have looked upon that scene and considered this mystery more profoundly than Mary? The challenge to her faith, in that dreadful and final moment of the realisation of the death of her son, must have been enormous. Was this really meant to be?

In a final act of degradation and humiliation Mary witnessed her son being stripped of his clothing before he was nailed to the cross and left hanging there for all to see. Designed to be a form of torture as well as killing, the agony and ignominy could take two or three days before death finally came. The fact that Jesus only took six hours to die is suggestive of the significant physical trauma and loss of blood that he had already endured before his crucifixion. Rather than how long it took, it is the total self-giving of the Lord and the faithful vigil of his mother that is our concern; we can be grateful therefore it was not worse.

St John records Mary as standing '*near the cross,*'³ and it is this act that is so memorably recorded and reflected upon in the hymn *Stabat Mater*, all twenty verses of it, and which begins, '*At the Cross her station keeping, stood the mournful Mother weeping, close to Jesus to the last.*'⁴ Mary will be the first to draw water from the well-spring of salvation,⁵ and her presence by the cross marks the beginning of the process whereby her son, being '*lifted up from the earth,*'⁶ will draw all people to himself. Mary is revealed to be the first and foremost disciple.

We should perhaps note that as we might use the title 'Mister' or 'Madam' as a token of respect, so Jesus uses the appellation '*Woman,*'⁷ in a way that would have seemed unremarkable to Hebrew society. As her son, the new Adam, begins his work of

refashioning creation anew so, as she stands at the cross, is Mary, 'Woman,' seen to be the new Eve, both Mother of God and Mother of the Church. By inviting St John to behold Mary as his mother, Jesus affirms that the Lord and his beloved disciple are now spiritual brothers. This bond of communion will be the sign of the Church, and as Mary the mother now beholds both her sons, we understand that by this act we are made members of the family of the Lord. Only the deepest of friendships can rival the depths of that bond created by familial knowledge and blood.

The hour of death brings the extinguishment of hope and a cold new reality that cannot be denied. It is final in a way that nothing else is, and none of Mary's other sorrows would have matched the intensity and finality of this one. It would surely have been at this moment that the sword, which long ago Simeon had foretold would '*pierce [Mary's] soul too,*'⁸ was driven deep into her Immaculate heart. Inevitably, this would mean that the love she bore for her son would now acquire the form of grief. Yet the void of death was to be crossed and conquered by Christ.

By virtue of the invitation issued to St John and extended to the whole Church, we too can now look upon Mary as our mother. Close to sinners who beseech her, Mary remains even closer to her son. Ever faithful to the will of God, Mary had witnessed the execution of her son and, by his resurrection, would come to understand it as an act of perfect love fulfilled. One of the great fears that the pandemic has brought to many is the fear of dying alone. Even were we to be destined to die alone, by entrusting us all to the care of his blessed mother, Jesus has offered to us and our loved ones the consolation of knowing that holy Mary will stand with us '*at the hour of our death.*'⁹ Mary is the kindest comforter of all those who mourn. Let us pray that as Mary's sorrow was turned to joy, so too will it be with all those souls who enter the heavenly kingdom, there to be embraced by her son the King, as brother, and by her as Queen and Mother.

*'Let me share with thee His pain, who for all my sins was slain,
who for me in torments died.'*¹⁰

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

2 June 2020

The picture is of *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John*, Rogier van der Weyden, (c. 1450–55), The Escorial Monastery, Madrid

1. *Stabat Mater*, verse 8, tr. Edward Caswall, d. 1878
2. *John* 19:30
3. *John* 19:25
4. *Stabat Mater*, verse 1
5. *Isaiah* 12:3
6. *John* 13:32
7. *John* 19:26
8. *Luke* 2:35
9. *Hail, Mary, full of grace*
10. *Stabat Mater*, verse 12