

**Some words for our Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour
Week 7 – Jesus is taken down from the Cross**

*'O how sad and sore distress'd
was that Mother, highly blest,
of the sole-begotten One.'*¹



Reading:

John 19:31-38

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

I have been fortunate in my life to visit the great Prado National Art Museum in Madrid. One of my strongest memories of the occasion is of first seeing Rogier van der Weyden's famous *The Descent from the Cross* pictured above. I became so fond of the picture that I have a print of it in my sitting room. The vivid Cobalt Blue of Our Lady's dress stood out I remember and I liked also how the two disciples, St John on the left of the picture and St Mary Magdalene on the right are both wearing red. The Magdalene's past, as a 'Scarlet Woman,' being subtly represented by her red sleeves.

Pitched in the middle of this riot of rich and vibrant colour however, it is the pale dead body of the Lord that really demands our attention.

The *contrapposto* Christ, that counterpoised pose so beloved of Classical and Renaissance painters, is used by van der Weyden to striking effect. The cruciform dead Lord, already perhaps stiffening in rigor mortis, is held in such a manner that his arms and feet still look as though they are held by the wood of the Cross. Further contemplation reveals that the body of Jesus is echoed in the posture of his mother who, overcome by grief, looks like she also has been crucified alongside her son. The loving mother has shared every agonising moment of the crucifixion of her son. In a chilling touch it is Mary's face that is ghostly white and, if we strip away the beard, we notice also how like his blessed mother Jesus looks. A masterpiece, the painting also speaks of something that continues to occur in many parts of the world but less and less so in this country; the practice of the dead body being prepared for the funeral by family or friends.

I well remember driving to the undertaker's parlour with Miss Eileen Johnson, Bishop Moverley's former housekeeper, on a bitterly cold day in December 1996. The bishop's funeral would take place just two days before Christmas and, the day before the funeral, there was to be a period of mourning at St Marie's cathedral with the bishop's body lying-in-state. As I had been the bishop's secretary at the time of his death I had been given the responsibility for organising the ceremonies and various other matters. Eileen accompanied me because, as the remaining members of the bishop's household, we both felt we had one final duty to perform for him. We would dress and vest his body as a bishop before he would be seen by the public.

The bishop had been ill for the preceding eighteen months and bed-ridden for almost a year so we already had a lot of experience in seeing him in varying states and of having to get him dressed and such. I still smile at the memory when, trying to ease my fingers underneath his head so that I could lift it up, my grip slipped and I dropped the bishop's head back onto the table. Cold and embalmed the bishop may have been but he had not lost his power to intimidate and, instinctively, I immediately apologised to him before, glancing at Eileen, we both briefly laughed at the absurdity of the moment. What I also clearly remember was the sense of privilege and responsibility of handling the corpse. Not a thing but a dead human person, I like to think we treated the deceased bishop with the same care and dignity that we had tried to afford him in life.

Having been called over the years to offer rites and prayers for the dying or recently deceased I find that I have kissed a number of corpses along the way. Where possible, I usually conclude with a blessing and a simple kiss on the forehead and, if I cannot now remember them all, I can definitely say that it is never something I have approached casually or by rote. Kissing a corpse is different, not just because the person is cold and clammy in a way that they are not when they are alive, but because you realise, straight away, that some part of them has already immediately departed. I have found this to be true in the cases of sudden and unexpected death and where someone has been in a coma for weeks or months and death has been long expected. Not everybody wants to touch a corpse, even when they have loved the deceased person passionately and intensely, while one or two others, unable to bear being parted, have to occasionally be dragged away. Ultimately, there is no right or wrong way with these things but I have found that most people, if they have the chance, do want that moment to say a particular goodbye before their loved one is removed and next encountered shrouded or encased. Sometimes it simply seems that, unconsciously, they just want to confirm with their own eyes that someone truly has 'gone.'

The practice of breaking the legs of the crucified hastened death as, no longer able to support the weight of their own body, the victim rapidly suffocated. As Jesus *'was already dead,'*² Mary not only had to behold her son's death throes, but she then had to endure watching her son's corpse being further abused when *'one of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance.'*³ One imagines that Mary and St John did not immediately perceive that the blood and water, which flowed from the Lord's side, was a sign of the fount of sacramental life of the Church - the waters of Baptism and the blood of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. I suspect it took John a long period of profound contemplation to arrive at this truth.

As Mary cradled her son's body she would have been painfully aware that, while physically present, that which had so animated her son in life was already absent. It fell to Mary by virtue of her maternal suffering to first join her son on the Cross. She was then called upon to further endure her own side being pierced by the sword of sorrow. As she embraced her beloved Jesus one last time a part of Mary would have died that day alongside her son.

*'Sojourners in this vale of tears, to thee, blest advocate, we cry;
pity our sorrows, calm our fears and soothe with hope our misery.
Refuge in grief, Star of the sea, pray for the mourner, pray for me.'*⁴

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

9 June 2020

The picture is of *The Descent from the Cross*, Rogier van der Weyden, c. 1435, Museo del Prado, Madrid

1. *Stabat Mater*, verse 3, tr. Edward Caswall, d. 1878

2. *John* 19:33

3. *John* 19:34

4. *Hail, Queen of heaven*, verse 3, John Lingard, (1771-1851)