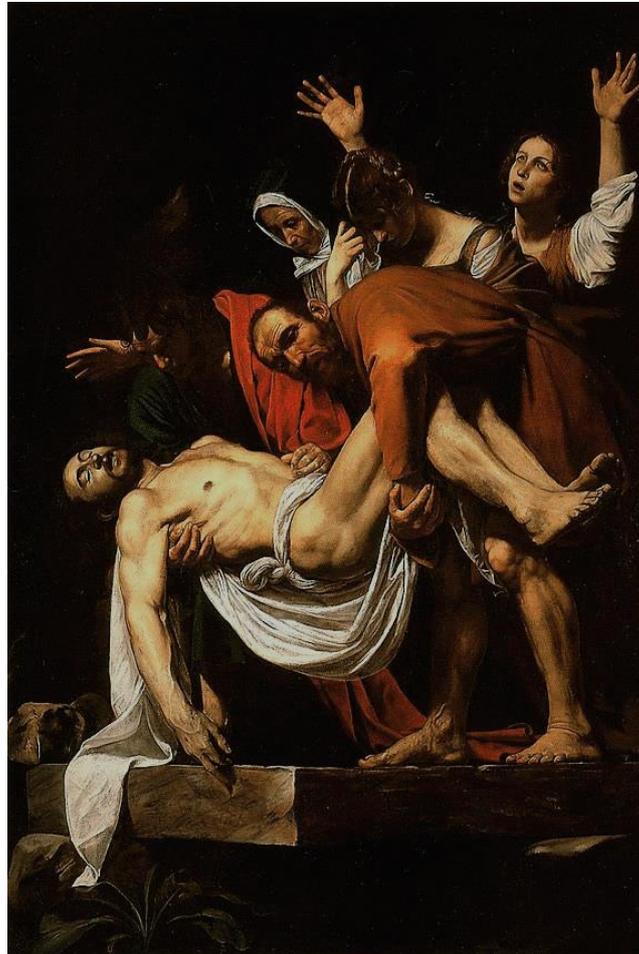


## Some words for our Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour Week 8 – The burial of Jesus

*'Let me mingle tears with thee, mourning Him who mourned for me,  
all the days that I may live.'*<sup>1</sup>



### **Reading:**

*John 19:39-42*

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

Some anthropologists believe that the practice of burying the dead may well have been one of the earliest expressions of the development of a religious sensibility in human beings. Even though practices continue to change and develop in societies and cultures across the globe, there remains a rich variety of customs and rituals surrounding the committal of a corpse. In both the Jewish and Christian traditions it is burial that is particularly esteemed and encouraged. Cremation was not customarily practised by Christians and, even now that it is permitted, Catholics are still encouraged not to scatter or strew ashes; *'Cremated remains should not normally be scattered above ground, but reverently returned to the earth.'*<sup>2</sup> This is because the practice

of burial or entombment follows in the tradition of what happened to the body of Jesus. *'Lord Jesus Christ, by your own three days in the tomb, you hallowed the graves of all who believe in you and so made the grave a sign of hope that promises resurrection even as it claims our mortal bodies.'*<sup>3</sup>

That the grave would become a sign of hope could not then have been known to Mary and the small group of disciples - including *a secret one*,<sup>4</sup> Joseph of Arimathea - who buried Jesus on that Good Friday. The Torah required that burial should take place as soon as possible after death, either before sunset of the same day or before sunset of the following day at the latest. This custom continues to be observed by many Jews to this day and what we think of as the 'funeral' is usually a separate and distinct occasion observed some time after the act of burial. Given that the following day was *'a day of special solemnity'*,<sup>5</sup> the great Passover feast, and daylight was fading, Jesus was buried on the day of his death. Putting the exceptions of certain communities aside, the trend in our society has been for the period between death and the funeral and final committal to grow, with two to three weeks now usually the norm. So, although the whole affair of our Lord's burial might appear rushed to us, it would not have been so for Mary and the other mourners. Indeed, in Jewish society an unburied body was regarded as a mark of shame and pollution while the Romans usually left the crucified to rot in place as lesson to all. Given his earlier concerns about a riot and the proximity of the Passover which had caused the large crowd in the first place, Pilate probably decided it was prudent to allow the body to be removed from the cross.

If that moment, which saw life extinguished and death suddenly present, marks the onset of our grief, and the acceptance of a division between the living and the dead, then the committal marks and formalises our separation. The deceased belongs to the past and it is only the mourners who may now be counted among the living. Judaism bestows an almost unique legal status on a person when they first come to know of the death of a loved one. At a time when grief can be so raw that it may become all-consuming, Mary would have immediately entered into the state of *Aninut*. A Hebrew word that conveys the meaning of 'deep sorrow,' it encompasses the short time from death to burial and it is a recognition by the rest of society that your pain and loss should be respected and that, consumed by grief, even your duties to God and other people are minimal.

As the concluding expression and completion of our physical care then, the laying of a body to rest can be a simple yet also beautiful thing, but it is stark and final also. We walk away; leaving a position to mark and a place to mourn. Sometimes this is

not available to us – a person has drowned far out at sea for example – and its absence as a site of memory, site of mourning, to use the historian Jay Winter’s phrase, can be keenly felt by those who mourn for many a year. Despite twelve weeks of lockdown, not a day has passed without at least one person having visited our cemetery and usually it has been a good few more.

Mortality remains our common bond, and it is never more sobering I have observed than at the moment of committal. We all must confront the reality that we too will one day pass and take our place in history. *‘Grant, O God that while we lament the departure of this your servant, we may always remember that we are most certainly to follow ... Give us the grace to prepare for that last hour by a good life that we may not be surprised by a sudden and un-provided death but be ever watching, that when you call, we may enter into eternal glory.’*<sup>6</sup> As I write this, the news is filled with images of toppled statues and heated debates over the meaning of a person’s history. I confess, I have wondered more than a few times, how many of us would like to be remembered for the worst thing that we have done? I am at peace knowing that our cemetery next door is only open to sinners and that personal memorials are eschewed in favour of headstones that request prayer and loving remembrance.

The tomb of Jesus, the place of Mary’s seventh and final Sorrow is also the site of her joy, commemorated in the first of the Glorious Mysteries of the Holy Rosary. If Mary could not know that the resting place of her son would become a sign of hope it does not mean that she lacked this virtue. If a committal is usually painful and difficult it brings a certain consolation also. However slight, there is a sense of satisfaction to be gained in knowing you have performed this final duty for your loved one. Most mourners are themselves restless until they put their beloved to rest. After all these years the story of Madeleine McCann has also resurfaced in the news and, should it prove to be the case that she is dead, one can only wonder how her parents, and others unfortunately like them, must have longed to put their daughter to rest.

*‘May Mary, the most merciful Virgin Mother of God, kindest comforter of those who mourn, commend to her Son the soul of this His servant, that through her motherly prayers, they may pass through the gates of death and, with her as guide, joyfully reach our longed for home in the heavenly fatherland.’*<sup>7</sup> Mary and her son’s disciples would be among the first to hear the Good News of the Resurrection and Mary’s faith, in God’s word and the person of her son, would be rewarded in a way that would have seemed unimaginable when the angel Gabriel first spoke to her. If hope can be described as a feeling of expectation or a desire that such a thing might happen then we can easily see how Mary could have remained faithful to the memory of her extraordinary son.

Even as she buried her loved one I suspect that, like us all, fragments of the things her son had said and done flashed before her mind. This is natural, and it surely happens to us all, but in Mary's case she must have also felt, however implausible, that something to do with her son was not truly dead. Did she remember a prayer, the words of a psalm perhaps? *'He heals the broken-hearted, he binds up all their wounds... The Lord delights in those who revere him, in those who wait for his love.'*<sup>8</sup> Lots of people have difficulty in coming to terms with someone's death and wrestling with the fact they are no longer here. In Mary's case, despite her grief and sorrow, when she considered the past and the people her son had resuscitated; Lazarus<sup>9</sup> or Jairus' daughter<sup>10</sup> or the widow's son at Nain,<sup>11</sup> might she, not unreasonably, have wondered, *can he do it; will he come back?*

*'Bend from thy throne at the voice of our crying,  
Bend to this earth which thy footsteps have trod;  
Stretch out thine arms to us living and dying,  
Mary Immaculate, Mother of God.'*

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

16 June 2020

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The picture is of *The Entombment of Christ*, Caravaggio, 1603-1604, *Pinacoteca Vaticana*, Vatican City

1. *Stabat Mater*, verse 13, tr. Edward Caswall, d. 1878

2. *Rite of Committal*, n.239, Order of Christian Funerals

3. *Prayer over the Place of Committal*, Order of Christian Funerals

4. *John* 19:38

5. *John* 19:38

6. *Prayer for Mourners*, Roman Ritual

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Psalms* 147:3 & 11

9. *John* 11:1-45

10. *Mark* 5:21-43

11. *Luke* 7:11-17

12. *Mary Immaculate, star of the morning*, verse 5, F. W. Weatherell