

Good Friday

15<sup>th</sup> April 2022

'Triduum II, Calvary: Carrying the Cross'

Is 52–53: *He was pierced through for our faults*

Ps 30: *My life is in Your hands, deliver me from the hands of those who hate me.*

Heb 4; 5: *During His life on earth He offered up prayer and entreaty ...*

Jn 18–19: the Passion according to John.

Yesterday night we began a 3-days' journey, the new exodus, the journey from slavery to salvation, bondage-to-sin to liberation. Today is the middle part of the journey, in which the real drama happens, the toughest part of the road. It's like the testing wilderness into which the ancient Israelites went on their exodus with Moses; that's where they first had to go, in order to go on later to victory: that middle part was the hardest. One might think that that's often the way: imagine walking a 3-day journey: day 1 is exciting, it's all fresh and new; day 3 is a relief, we're nearly there, with joy the longed-for destiny is in sight. And day 2? Yes, day 2, the middle part of the road, that might be the slog and the suffering ... it might well be the longest day, the long, hard, bitter road. And that's what it is in the 3-day's journey of the *Triduum*, it's the long, hard, middle day; it's Good Friday, and the journey of this day is the Way of the Cross. This 2<sup>nd</sup> part of our journey with

Jesus is from Gethsemane where we ended the first day, to Calvary, the place of the Skull, the hill of crucifixion.

When you go to the Holy Land ("when," not "if"!) ... you discover that it's not so far; once again the distances are small, crossing back and forth Jerusalem isn't so far. From the Mt of Olives, back across the Kidron Valley to the *Praetorium*, Pilate's HQ, isn't a long walk, maybe a mile or so. And from the *Praetorium* to Calvary not even half that distance. But day 2 is no stroll. In words made famous at the first moon landing, but actually way more true in the context of the journey of Good Friday "it's one small step for a man; one giant leap for mankind." This night walk of Jesus, betrayed by Judas and bound with chains, from Gethsemane to Caiaphas; and then the day walk to Pilate and with the Cross to Calvary, is maybe the cruellest journey made by anyone in all human history, but one that is suffered by the innocent, Jesus willingly to save us; endured by the holy Son of God in a way that no-one else could have done ... not only carrying on despite the beatings and brutality; not only bearing the heavy

cross-beam, lashed to the wood of His own Cross so that He could not break His own falls; but also bearing the vicious, almost unbearable, weight of the sins of the world, the sins of all humanity, the sins of all human history. This is the walk that Jesus makes along the *Via Dolorosa* — it's but a few hundred yards, but they are the toughest steps ever taken by man, and only managed for that man is also God, driven by the love of His Sacred Heart to pour out His precious blood to the last drop.

What do we find today, in Jerusalem, when we make that walk to Calvary? The *Via Dolorosa* is a *walk*; you can't take it by car or bus! It's along the narrow streets of old Jerusalem, up city steps and through the bustling market of shops whose wares spill out on to the pathways. When you take it, you discover that the way of the Cross happens in the midst of busy and sometimes oblivious humanity — no doubt it was the same for Jesus. And when you get to Calvary, then what? Well ... it's not quite what you'd expect! (It's not like you've seen it in the films!) The site of Calvary is within a large church, the 'Holy

Sepulchre,' an overarching complex of chapels, aisles, steps, niches, altars, attended to by 7 different Christian denominations, Catholics amongst them. Each and every one of those denominations honour the one sacred spot of Calvary. One climbs the steps to that chapel, and then one stoops under the altar and reaches to touch or kiss the rocky outcrop of that mount of Calvary. St Helena revealed that spot back in the early 4<sup>th</sup> c., demolishing the 2<sup>nd</sup>-c. pagan Roman temple that had been deliberately built over the sacred site of the crucifixion, and beginning the construction of the church that adorns the site today. Just as the pilgrims in Jerusalem, completing the way of the Cross stoop to venerate the rock of Calvary, touching that stone on which was mounted the Saviour's cross, so we stoop, kneel, genuflect, kiss, touch ... the wood of the cross today. We creep to the cross, a tiny little journey for us, from our seats to the foot of the cross, but a profound one, a great and moving journey for our hearts, as we take in the meaning of this Cross: my Saviour, Jesus Christ, carried it, and carried my sins away. As the Prayer before a

Crucifix has it, “with deep affection and grief of soul, I ponder within myself and mentally contemplate Your five most precious wounds.” Let us be fully recollected, with thanksgiving in our hearts, as we make that procession to the Cross later, our short journey, to accompany the saving sacrifice of the suffering servant and our Saviour God.

What always strikes me as I contemplate the Passion, and the Way of the Cross is that it is for Jesus an afflicted journey — a hard road, and lonely one ... ‘lonely’ in the sense that He alone can bear this dreadful burden, but *not* lonely in the sense that along the way He encounters so many people. Have you ever stopped to think how *many* lives He touches even in those very last hours of His earthly ministry? Just as He has ministered divine love, forgiveness, healing, and the saving message of the Gospel throughout His 3 years, so He still does now, even as the weight of the Cross threatens to crush Him. The Temple guard including Malchus, Annas, Caiaphas, Herod, Pontius Pilate, Mary His blessed Mother, Simon of Cyrene, Veronica, the mourning women, St John, the good

thief ... All these saving encounters, even as He suffered on the road. Some listened to His counsel (like the mourning women); some were healed (like Malchus); some were saved at the last minute (like the good thief); some were just perplexed (like Herod); some were afraid (like Pilate); some rejected and poured scorn (like the high priests); some were consoled (like Mary His Mother); some were moved to exercise great charity (like Simon, and Veronica); some were able to gaze on the scene, and in deep faith to see the glory of the Passion despite its outward bloodiness and beatings (like St John). How many souls are touched as Jesus continues to pour out generously the transforming grace that God always offers. As His precious blood drains away, so He offers unceasingly to all those He encounters — and to us — the chance to be bathed in quiet forgiveness and spiritual healing from the noisy chaos of sin and death.

I cannot contemplate this royal road from Gethsemane to Calvary, this year, without having in my mind’s eye those who are participating in terrible journeys

of suffering in the Ukraine. Surely it is right to associate the blessings of this Good Friday with the needs of those caught up, unwillingly, in the atrocities of the war. Think of those sad and sorrowing journeys into, or away from, conflict: young Russian conscripts heading to fight, unprepared; Ukrainian nationals going back to their homeland to defend it; Ukrainian refugee families fleeing in their millions (often on foot) to western-Ukrainian cities, or across borders to friendly countries: Poland, Hungary, Romania, and indeed to our own city of London; Ukrainians walking back into their liberated cities, only to find devastation, wrecked dwellings, murdered neighbours. All journeys of horrifying tragedy ... We catch them up into this Good Friday journey, and we pick them up by our prayers and our love. The Church has mandated for this Good Friday 2022 a special prayer in the sequence of solemn Bidding Prayers a remembrance of the Ukrainian people, that they be held close to the heart of the crucified Jesus in the passion that they too are experiencing this Lent — 50 days, so far — and on into the Easter season: may

the Lord who suffers Himself so much bring to bear a peace upon their nation as it suffers so much.

We also carry on this journey, as Jesus walks willingly and fearlessly into the jaws of death, those who have *died*. Not only all those, on both sides, who have died needlessly in this recent conflict, but also all those whose deaths we mourn personally. Since I left my parish and came here to Newman House, several parishioners whom I knew well have since died, including a dear friend of only 44; plus parents of 3 friends in recent weeks ... and then of course my own mother. May Jesus carry them on His Good Friday journey, lifting them up in death and on to their feet, that their passage to the grave may be peaceful, and no longer a painful road. Jesus suffers for them, taking away sins, that their own deaths may be full of grace. At the end of that road, for Jesus, and for us, and for our dearly departed loved ones, the precious Cross on Calvary stands as medicine against the ills of sin and death. Jesus hangs on it, having gone there willingly for us, to reconcile us all, in such love, to the Almighty Father.