



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5th Sunday of Lent Year B

Passion Sunday

Readings: Jeremiah 31: 31-34, Ps 50, Hebrews 5: 7-9, John 12: 20-30

Jesus seems to delight in non-sequiturs. Say something to Him and back He comes with a statement that seems to bear little relation to the question put or the news given. Today's Gospel is no exception.

A party of Greeks ask to see Jesus. A simple request, you might have thought, from some pilgrims to the Holy City. It is greeted with an outburst from Jesus about being glorified and then His suffering and death. Little wonder that the disciples are often in a continuous state of puzzlement.

We can see, in the Greek delegation's desire, a further proof of the universal nature of the Church to come, first prefigured in the coming of the Magi all those years ago. It is a sign that will take the little Hebrew Church of the Pentecost, a mere twenty years to adjust to and begin to see their part in the fulfilment of the prophecies that, through the Jews, through the descendants of Abraham, through the royal line of David, salvation will come to the hitherto excluded gentile world. The horizons are broadened explosively into the dynamic of history.

But there is also, amidst this glorification of God in the promise of the Universal Church, a nagging prerequisite. The road to salvation leads through suffering and death. Most religions attempt to deal with this unhappy paradox. Buddhism majors on its avoidance. Hinduism sees it as cyclical. Judaism has lived it for millennia. Christianity takes it on as the inevitable route to glory.

At the heart of our Faith is the Crucified Lord. At the centre of our liturgical year is the long haul of Lenten discipline, focussed on the way that will lead to the Via Dolorosa and the Calvary.

All human beings are confronted by and conflicted by the mystery of suffering and death. Like Christ Himself, we do not look forward to it and may pray, at least temporarily, to avoid it but it remains, for all our efforts and prayers, the royal road to the eternal city. How we deal with these unwanted features of our journey home is critical. There is a growing swell of pagan chorus for the right to be murdered by our family and friends and doctors. There is the understandable desire to circumvent the suffering writ large and I am not unsympathetic to the feeling or the fear of suffering. But to take this route is to gainsay the sovereignty of God. Suicide, by whatever means, is an arrogation to man of the disposal of the gift of God.

Suffering is, generally, something we would do anything to avoid yet, in Christian tradition there is a central place for it in the road of our returning and our salvation. If that suffering comes at the end of a long and fulfilled life, it does not hurt any the less. We are still faced with diminution, loss, pain, the end of autonomy, the frustration of

dependence, the feeling of failure and the growing awareness of our aloneness and the impending separation from all that we have ever known or remember. Our physical clings to life with a stubbornness that we could scarcely have imagined possible. Our spiritual and our mental gird themselves for what seems to be the inevitable defeat.

What we learn, in our suffering though, is critical. It is part of our continuing vitality and hope for the future promised. We are suddenly no longer independent, if indeed that independence was ever more than an illusion. All the things we took for granted are, one by one, withdrawn. The things we were able to do cut down to next to nothing. Our little bark scarce able to catch the wind in its sails to see us safely harbour home.

Yet, in all this, we can recapture through the pain of loss and physical bereavement, the knowledge of our utter dependence on God. We can see clearly the things that really and truly matter. We can readily lay down those burdens which have thus far detained us from the ultimate encounter and reconciliation with the One who made us and loves us still. As all is stripped away we are still able to recognise and give thanks for that unfailing love which manifests itself through the pain of the Calvary and through the love and prayer that surrounds us from those who have journeyed with us thus far and will love us home to our origin and our end.

We will have times, in the Gethsemane, when our most fervent prayer is to pass this chalice by. We will have moments on the Dolorosa when, beaten to the floor by pain and the pain of loss, we will feel the compassionate cloth of the Veronica wipe our sweat stained, blood blind

face. We will know moments when the Mother of Christ, the Mother of us all, will greet us and embrace us on the way of sorrows. We will give quiet and heartfelt thanks for the Cyrenian who walks beside us to share the burden and pray with us when we have no breath left to sing the psalms of the final ascent.

We will, if we are so determined, get to walk that final mile with Christ and hang beside Him on Golgotha's cruel tree of death. There we can see the world through His eyes. There we can forgive. There we can commend our souls to the Father. There we can pray the prayer of the dying thief. 'Remember me...' There we can see the darkness and not fear for it is but the presaging of the Harrowing of Hell and the liberation of Fallen Man. There we can entrust ourselves absolutely to the mystery of the Risen Christ. At the end of Lent is the Passion. At the end of the Passion is Easter and the Miracle of the Third Day.

All this, God in Man, Jesus Christ, has gone through for us. It is our privilege, fear and pain notwithstanding, to follow Him on this sacred journey that, by His grace, we may become Man in God for all eternity.