

5th Sunday in Lent

Year B

*Give me justice, O God, and defend my cause against the wicked;
rescue me from deceitful and unjust men.
You, O God, are my refuge.*

(Readings: Jeremiah 31: 31-34. I will make a new covenant and never call their sin to mind.
Hebrews 5: 7-9. He learnt to obey and became the source of eternal salvation.
John 12: 20-30. If a grain of wheat fall on the ground and dies, it yields a rich harvest.)

Jesus was reaching the end of his mission. The time was rapidly approaching when he would give up his life on earth so that the salvation of sinners could be accomplished. He stood in our place, as a man like us in all things except sin. And today's Gospel reminds us what his sacrifice meant in human terms.

Jesus, as God, knew from all eternity that his Father wanted him to take human flesh and undergo the cruellest of all deaths for our salvation. He foresaw every detail of his sufferings. And he knew that they would include the brutal Roman scourging. But was it all really necessary? For example, couldn't he have said to his Father that he would accept death, even death on a cross, but please do not put the idea of scourging him into Pilate's mind."

Not meaning to compare myself with our Lord in any way, but I could understand Jesus speaking to his Father like that. And I could understand it because I have had some experience of a 20th Century form of scourging, coming from my schooldays; those distant days when I was regularly given the business end of the cane as punishment. And, if I'm honest, I probably deserved it! Well, sometimes.

For me, the shame, and moreover, the anticipated *pain* was really quite a fearful prospect, especially given the fierce severity of my old headmaster and the strength of his right arm. The fact that Jesus didn't even attempt to avoid the scourging is, to me, both a wonder, at the purely physical level, and yet more proof of the intensity of his love for us.

Speaking to his disciples, Jesus calls himself the "Son of Man". And he tells them that his soul is troubled. No wonder he is anxious and distressed, for his death is now very close.

There must have been many moments in his life when he wished, and with all his heart, that he could avoid the pain. At those moments he prayed, as St. Paul tells us, "aloud and in silent tears". But did he pray to be released from his mission? Or, rather, did he pray to be given the strength to complete it?

We know that just a few hours before his death, in a state of extreme anxiety Jesus prayed intensely in the Garden of Gethsemane, appealing to his Father to let the chalice pass him by. His fear was so great that 'his sweat became, as it were, great drops of blood'.

As a man, Jesus felt natural human fear, and he longed to be released. Just conversing with his Father about his sufferings must have brought him some comfort, because, as the old adage goes, a problem shared is a problem halved. He knew and he accepted his Father's loving plan for our redemption, and he was willing to carry it out.

As a man, Jesus felt physical pain, and he felt rejection. He felt humiliation, and he felt fear – just as we all do. But as God, he was able to see the purpose of it all. He knew where and how it would all end. He knew that he would ultimately triumph over suffering and death, and that his ‘punishment for us’, would bring us peace.

For so many people, it is difficult to make sense of the troubles and the afflictions they endure – refugees who have lost their homes and all their belongings; people locked in perpetual poverty, unable to properly feed their families or pay their bills; the lonely, disconnected people sealed in lingering isolation; vulnerable, anxious people, too afraid to walk out alone. So very many people, suffering in so very many ways. And for most of these there is nothing but gloom and darkness, a long dark tunnel with no sign of any light at the end of it.

Jesus knew what the future held for him. From the moment he came into our world he was conscious of the terrible ordeal he would face, and the personal, physical pain he would endure.

When we are struggling to find a reason for the pain and difficulties in our lives, we often wish we could peer through the darkness and see what lies ahead, to make some sense of it. Some people even consult clairvoyants and fortune-tellers in a vain attempt to know the future. But we must thank God that, in his wisdom, he hides it from us, for how would we cope if we knew, today, that we would, say, go blind, or be crippled, or develop cancer, or lose our family in some terrible accident?

Such terrible knowledge would paralyse us. I dare say that, some would even be driven to suicide, unable to live with it.

When despair overwhelms us, it is a comfort to remember that Jesus, too, experienced human suffering and, therefore, he shares and understands all our anxieties, and all our sorrows. He is our brother, and like him we can pray to our heavenly Father to give *us* strength in our times of trial. But unlike Jesus, we cannot see the end of the tunnel. We have to try to put our trust in God, believing that everything we endure, everything we suffer in our lives, is part of his plan.

Jesus shows us that whatever cross we are given, it may not be taken away from us, but he *will* help us to carry it, for where he leads, we can follow in trust, and ultimately, in safety.

Today, we thank Jesus for all that he endured for our sakes, for our salvation. And we think of our suffering brothers and sisters who are at their wits’ end, especially those in the midst of conflict and war, unable to see God’s purpose in their misfortune.

May God comfort them. And may he enlighten us to see just how much they are suffering. May he make us compassionate towards all who suffer, and show us how best to help them.