

Six hours with the Lord

We are I think familiar with the moment in the gospel story when Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, returns from his anguished prayer to find the disciples asleep – *had you not the strength to stay awake for one hour?* Well we have six hours to spend contemplating the mystery which is the passion and death of Jesus and the events surrounding it and the people involved in it. I hope the timetable I have devised will suit you all but please don't feel constrained by it. If you would prefer to wonder off and do your own thing then that is fine. There is an opportunity for confession and you may wish to avail yourselves of that, but it is entirely up to you.

So six hours is all we have and we have come away here to be in a quiet place –something else that Jesus encouraged his disciples to do. We remember he had sent them out on the first great mission and upon their return he called them to come away to rest for a while. We then in our way, have chosen to be obedient to that call. We have come away in order to think and to ponder on what we are about to enter into. We have come to a holy place where the pattern of the working day is not regulated by the need to be constantly doing, but by the call to prayer, and our Lenten experience is one in which our prayer takes its place alongside and equal to our doing. So let these hours be at the disposal of our prayer, let them unfold as they will in an atmosphere of calm and peacefulness, and let whatever comes into our thoughts and our hearts arrive with graciousness and be greeted with joy and happiness.

We are well into Lent and the horizon is beginning to fill with the shadow of the cross. It is then right that our own thoughts should now become more and more attuned to what this horizon will realise. Rather than it becoming further and further away from our understanding, we want to dive into the fullness of its importance, so that what is happening to us and around us both personally and communally, can be done so with openness and insight. Our lives are many layered and diverse. What happens to us often defies explanation and we can struggle to come to terms with the many and various twists and turns that our lives take. We question and demand explanations. We ask why and what for? We worry about how things will turn out, and we take decisions and make choices sometimes recklessly and without thought. But one thing we know for certain is that all of these situations that assail us, are also to be found in the gospel and in particular in the passion. All of them are moments through which the love of Jesus can be accessed and touched. We don't always see it like this, and often we rile against it and refuse to acknowledge it, but if you think about it deeply, the reality of all life is a 'living out' of the passion. What makes a difference is that our faith teaches us is that in living out this reality, we experience resurrection too.

This of course is the hardest part; we take the knocks and suffer the blows, we fall down and are trampled on. We deny and betray and refuse to forgive, and ultimately our love is tested to the limits. It is all here, laid out before us in the narrative which we will read on Palm Sunday and Good Friday if we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. And what we see and hear are the events that brought Jesus, the incarnate word of God, to this moment of ultimate testing. In these narratives the testing of an individual's power to uphold his love and trust in God is laid bare, and our place on the canvass is there somewhere. We can identify with all of the characters and all the events for which we take our share in the laying of blame. And it is from the moment of that admission that our redemption commences as we acknowledge our need of mercy and loving forgiveness.

All of us have sorrows to lament and misdeeds to recant of and all of us can imagine being present during the events of that fateful week, standing on that Via Dolorosa and witnessing what was taking place. So we're going to examine some of the people involved just in order to watch them and their actions and their motives and to look to try to understand them in order to understand our selves. So I have chosen Martha & Mary, Judas Iscariot, Simon Peter, Pontius Pilate, Simon of Cyrene, Mary the mother of Jesus and Nicodemus to ask: Who am I? For some of the ones I've chosen you may find yourself unable to empathise with, and for others you may find yourself shedding tears of sorrow for, but remember this; they were there.

Martha and Mary; Trusting in the Lord

We know these sisters from Luke's gospel where they entertain Jesus. Mary sits at the feet of the Lord whilst Martha does all the serving. This domestic scene is no doubt familiar to us all with its seemingly unfair division of labour and a somewhat fraught family atmosphere in the brewing. But in the events leading up to final days of Jesus' life we encounter these sisters in a different light altogether.

The sisters have a brother Lazarus who has died. We don't know how or why he has died. It may have been an accident or a sudden collapse but the implication is that the onset of the illness has caused the sisters such concern that they send for Jesus in the hope that he will come and cure their brother. The tragedy for the family is that Jesus doesn't come until after Lazarus has died.

How often are our own families rocked by the tragedy of premature death? We feel robbed and somehow cheated because of what has happened. We may well have prayed to God and to Jesus for an intervention, that something be done urgently to put things right and to restore our dying relative to health. The fact that nothing happens, that there is no answer to our prayer can lead to bitterness and accusation – both Martha and Mary greet Jesus with the same refrain - *if you had been here my brother would not have died* – is that not our sentiment too? None of us want to have to face the tragedy of the unexpected and premature death of a loved one. It frightens us as we consider how the loss of our loved one will leave us, how it will effect us. It isn't natural and it shouldn't happen. But it does and our faith is of no use if it fails to help us in making sense of these moments of tragic loss.

So what is the answer? Just how does faith make a difference? We all know that if you get into a car the worse for drink consequences happen. The world is the world and the freedoms we have, to live as we live, are the product of our choices. No-one though chooses to become ill, no-one chooses to get cancer, but the reality is that they do and because our lives are so precious and so fragile, we rile against that which the world of "cause and effect" ultimately produces. Is it proper then that we place the responsibility with God? *If you had been here he would not have died*. Set that alongside: *My God, my God why have you forsaken me?* and you get your answer. We live wounded lives and in the hidden depths of that woundedness lies the mystery of our humanity. The answer is bound up in that complexity for which reason demands a response which only faith can provide.

What Jesus asks of Martha and Mary is a deep and abiding trust. He knows how difficult it is to give, because it is a trust that the closer we come to the cross, the greater becomes the ask. Martha and Mary in their grief are asked to place their trust in Jesus. They stand at the grave of their dead brother and are asked to believe. The narrative then describes the miracle that prefigures Easter as Lazarus emerges. So Martha and Mary are brought to the cross in and through the suffering of their brother and are asked to stand at his grave and ponder a real tragic death that mirrors the thousands of deaths which take place day by day in so many circumstances. There is no clear cut

answer that will sweep away our sorrow and grief; there is only the call to trust. Dare we stand before the grave and like them trust?

Judas; Hubris and self possessed pride

Of all the roles played by the different characters in the passion his seems the most pernicious, the most clear cut; a betrayal has been perpetrated and all for the want of bag of silver. But the gospel offers an insight into the nature of this man's character which unfolds a deep and disturbing flaw that perhaps is at the root of his action.

At a supper at Bethany six days before the Passover, the gospel describes a sharp encounter between Judas and Mary the brother of Lazarus, which exposes the pride and hubris of Judas set against the trust and dedication of Mary.

Mary brought in a pound of very costly ointment, pure nard, and with it anointed the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair; the house was filled with the scent of the ointment. The Judas Iscariot – one of his disciples, the man who was to betray him – said “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?”

Judas speaks not out of concern for the poor, but out of disdain for what Mary has done. The deed that she has carried out is one of deep trust. It can not be hidden away – the scent filled the whole house- it would have been noticed by everyone and it would have caught everyone's attention, exposing Mary as the perpetrator, causing her to be set apart and become the focus of comment and reaction. Mary has done something which could not remain concealed and Judas responds not with generosity, but with a need seemingly to justify his own hubris. His pride will not let him be outdone by Mary, and so to demean her and her act, he scowls that the precious ointment should have been sold and the money given to the poor. It exposes him for what he is, and it ferments in him his resentment of the others and perhaps he begins to formulate his plan to hand Jesus over to the authorities.

Pride and resentment can become great obstacles blocking our pathway to Jesus. We can build up real resentment for others which can darken our hearts and sully our relationships. We can only come to Christ through others and their example of loving, and if we allow our own folly and pride to stiffen us and become a barrier to their generosity, then all we achieve is our own defeat and negation. Our minds and our hearts will be turned inwards seeking only to justify our selfishness in a corrosive and bitter way. In a real way we betray the ones who love us, since our relationships become corrupted and we can no longer accept the motivation of others for what it is. We fail to see the freedom and joy with which others offer themselves, and we attach our own twisted motives to their actions, applying our misguided thinking to them. It leads ultimately to our own ruin.

We will never know what was in Judas' heart when he made that journey to the house of the High Priest, nor we will know the harrowing moments he experienced following his “act of betrayal”, whether or not he stood there on the pathway that lead through Jerusalem to Golgotha perhaps hiding behind others, and glimpsing Jesus carrying the cross, whilst making sure he avoided the gaze of his Master. Our pride can damage us when we allow it to overwhelm our motives and when we are filled, not with the scent of a beautiful ointment but with the stench of our own hubris.

Peter; Dissemblance and denial

Finally this morning we turn to Simon Peter, the rock on whom Jesus was to build the Church. During Holy Week that nick name comes back to haunt him and in his darkest nightmare it crushes him. We recall his bravura when in front of all his fellow apostles he defies Jesus:

Heaven preserve you Lord this must not happen to you

How bold he seemed at that moment, certain that what he was doing was protecting Jesus rather than denying him his fate. And now in the courtyard, with those prophetic words of Jesus ringing in his ears reminding him how he had been told by Jesus that he was going to disown him, he is harpooned by a servant girl who points her finger at him and says:

You too were with Jesus the Galilean

And the rock crumbles. Peter's adamant avowal that he would never disown Jesus lies shattered in pieces on the flagstones of that Courtyard. Yet this "denial" which seems so blatant is nuanced and many layered, from a seemingly up front fear of the ramifications for him of his admission, to a psychological and philosophical exploration of what it is to admit that you can't fathom or truly "know" as in "understand" a person, even if you've lived and walked alongside them. The distance from the one to the other covers the whole spectrum of emotions and of reasoning that we all go through when our allegiance is questioned. Failing in the face of such pressure is understandable; we've all thought: there but for the grace of God...

Yet how often we are asked to make that same avowal, and how often we fall short. How often, when we think we're safe in the crowd, there comes the moment of crisis, unexpected and unsought. Am I to be exposed, and a finger pointed at me? How will I respond? "I don't know him" suddenly becomes an attractive option. Less fuss, less mess, no argument, anything for the quiet life, just leave me alone. But the situation isn't left alone, it escalates and becomes more serious and we're left shouting and screaming for all to hear: I never did understand him really. It's a sham and we know it, we're just caught on the hop, frozen in the headlights. Why are they expecting me to say something, rather than somebody else? And the gaze of Jesus catches our eye and we turn away in denial. Is it guilt that causes us to fail? The knowledge that we have let him down time after time weighs heavy on the soul. How can it be overcome? The words have been spoken, can they be taken back? We didn't really mean them, we're just helpless, afraid for our own skin, and that's the point. Our dissembling, our denial is our defence mechanism at work, in our heads we're all over the place, and like Peter we lash out at one moment and are ready and willing to deny it all at the next. What a mess.

It's crazy how it all seems to gain a momentum of its own, and we have to pile denial upon denial in order to keep it intact. Peter can't, and the whole edifice comes tumbling down. What is going to happen? Irony upon irony, the one who was going to save Jesus from his fate, is now the one who relies on Jesus to save him from his fate.

We deny Jesus so many times more than Peter ever did. We deny him our love, we deny him our time and our space, we deny him our self because we don't understand him; we don't know him. Even though we have walked with him and sought to know him, we still are capable of shutting him out and keeping him at a distance, dissembling to ourselves in our own minds that we've never known him.

Let's take some time now to gather our thoughts.....

This afternoon we'll consider *Pontius Pilate: Power and its abuse. Simon of Cyrene; the outsider. Mary the mother of Jesus; A pondering and grief stricken heart. Nicodemus; The courage to be drawn in.*

Post Lunch

Welcome back.

Picking up from where we left off we'll be reflecting on four more individuals from the Passion story that stimulate the question; *who am I* in this vital event for humanity.

Pontius Pilate: Power and its abuse

A day begins like any other. It carries with it its own concerns and needs which generate their own actions and consequences. None of us are ever sure of what will transpire; a flippant remark, an off the cuff statement, it can create its own momentum and gather its own dynamic which once set in motion become impossible to retract.

Pontius Pilate, was the Governor of Judaea, and the representative of the Roman Empire. We all look at him and wonder about his instincts and motives, his sympathies and his concerns. How was he meant to weigh up the all the options? Take the pathway of minimum hassle, get it all over and done with quickly, and give the crowd what they want. Or recognise the right of the person standing before him awaiting his judgement and apply true justice to the evidence before him and with it attract the possibility of a chaos far in excess of what he could easily manage or control. Power and authority set against corruption and abuse.

John's gospel sums it up perfectly – What is truth? The gospel of John begins with a description of the Word as being full of grace and truth, and when that description is set against the instincts of the world, when the world is presented with the moment of crisis or judgement about where truth lies in its reckoning, it takes a step back and recoils, because it would rather not face having to choose. And so Pilate turns it into a throw way line, which carries within it a sinister connotation that truth is just as disposable a concept as we want to make it. My truth, your truth is just what we want it to be, and we thus manipulate it in order that it fits our needs to the extent that we become economic with it, so that our own prevaricating seems acceptable. Let's just wash it away and pour it down the sluice. Nice and neat; problem solved and gone away.

What has actually happened and what we've actually done is to have assumed a certain power over the truth, and we have given ourselves authority to abuse it. The fact that this happens during the interrogation of the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth, is massively important. Abuse happens because we hold sway; the power of the strong over the weak and human institutions become susceptible to the grave danger of allowing the corrupting features of power to invade them. Institutional racism, institutional corruption, institutional abuse; all of these elements have featured in our hierarchies and have caused untold damage and hurt, and the Church can't claim exemption.

You know that among the gentiles those they call their rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. Among you this is not to happen.

I wonder if we can hear those words when we listen to Pilate asking *what is truth?* and say them to ourselves each day.

Simon of Cyrene; the outsider

Here is someone who had no intention of becoming involved. No detail is given as to why he was in Jerusalem but from our history we know that Cyrene the town was on the Mediterranean coast of what is now modern day Libya. It had been colonised by the Romans and was an important port and had its own indigenous Jewish population. Simon it might be fair to assume was then most likely to have been a Jew from Cyrene, possibly come to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Whether he was aware of what had been happening in Jerusalem regarding Jesus is not known, but it is clear from what the gospel implies, that he was a reluctant participant in the events of the passion. Perhaps he was more intent on minding his own business and not really wanting to become involved at all, no doubt he would certainly have been happier staying on the periphery, tending to his own needs.

But we can see here something very much akin to our own sentiments. We too are for more concerned with avoiding any sort of involvement, much preferring to stand in the aisles than to take centre stage. Of course it may have been bad luck for him – the wrong place at the wrong time, and it's perfectly possible to imagine him cursing his luck and saying to himself: this is just what I don't need, as he got caught up in some local judicial procedure which had nothing to do with him and we can almost hear him saying the words. But the cruelty of the world can explode into our faces at anytime, and rather than a Roman official press ganging us to help, for us it is the voice of Jesus in the gospel, who is putting the demand to us: when I was naked you never clothed me, when I was hungry you never gave me food, thirsty and you never gave me drink, sick and you never came to visit me and these are the words that ring out, and we say: when Lord? Because in reality we too prefer to stay aloof, and avoid all the hassle.

How does this episode affect us? Are we troubled by the implication that we are sometimes reluctant participants, happy to remain as spectators standing on the outside? Why is it that we don't act to become more involved, why is it that our reticence wins? Well it's always possible to find an excuse and just say *no* rather than abandon what we we're doing and say *yes*. But every day the gospel puts it squarely before us, when Jesus calls us to take up the cross and follow him. Every encounter with Christ changes us, and Simon must have experienced something that day. Did he remain at Golgotha and stay to watch, or did he leave and resume his affairs without a second thought? If he stayed what were his feelings on hearing Jesus speaking to the women – *do not weep for me but for yourselves*. What thoughts did such words evoke in Simon's mind as he reflected on his own reluctance to get involved? *Father forgive them they do not know what they are doing*. Simon had been sure of what he was going to do that day and providence intervened. Is God's providence, his grace, at work in us, beckoning us to pick up the cross and to hear the prophetic words being spoken?

Here is an outsider whose place at the passion was accidental and unplanned. This event, this death had no place in his expectation for the day and yet it changed his life. The cross must change our lives too and make us aware of the burdens which are being carried not just by our loved ones, but also by those whom we don't know, by those whom we consider as outsiders who although unknown to us, walk the same path and are called however reluctantly, to play out the role of Simon.

Mary the mother of Jesus: A pondering and grief stricken heart

The presence of the mother of Jesus at this harrowing moment intensifies and heightens the feelings that already exist for her. Any mother who has lost her child must feel as though part of her has died too. We must banish from our thoughts the notion that Mary would have felt any differently. To seek to imply otherwise does her and all mothers a great injustice and a disservice. But there is something more that attaches to Mary. And in particular this attachment derives through the way in which her own discipleship has been shaped by the events as narrated throughout the gospel.

We see her role as that of a disciple as we should, yet her discipleship takes an alternative path to that of the apostles, and although the uniqueness of her calling is to be acknowledged, there is nevertheless a universality about it that connects us all. It is therefore inviolable that motherhood and the bond which it forges be present. How this is experienced and felt is utterly unique to every mother. But when Mary says “Yes” to the message she is given by the angel, she says *yes* not just to the joy and happiness of expectation, but *yes* to grief and sorrow as well. There is no stepping away from the reality of what is to happen. That *yes* had no qualification but was enfolded within an appreciation and understanding of what Mary herself exclaimed as her *handmaidenness*. She was to be a model not simply or solely of Christian motherhood, but a model of Christian *service* as she names it, she is the *slave* or *servant* of the Lord.

As such, this leads into the very centre of the *pondering and grief stricken heart* that she experiences not just at the foot of the cross, but in her whole education as a disciple. We see it as it begins in the stable at Bethlehem as she ponders on the events that have happened, and it continues at the temple in Jerusalem as her child is presented to the Lord, and then as Jesus is later recovered. As Jesus grows in wisdom and maturity, so she stores these things up in her heart and when the time comes for him to leave her, her concern is voiced and the kinship forged over the childhood and adolescent years and on into the adulthood ones, is now to be placed within another context which Mary must understand. *Who is my mother – those who hear and do the word of God.*

Our own discipleship is full of many ups and downs, of moments of great joy and exhilaration and also of deep uncertainties and grief. Our paths bring us ultimately to this place of confusion and puzzlement where for Mary there is silence. She has no words to offer. The last words recorded as spoken by her in John’s gospel remain pertinent: *Do whatever he tells you.* Her “Yes” to the angel is not retracted even now as she witnesses the torment before her, and here there is a lesson for us who in such circumstances would feel justified in withdrawing our *yes*. Damaged by our own experiences, wounded in our own discipleship, we cannot always silently accept the enormity of what is asked of us; our hearts are broken and our lives fractured.

Yet Mary stays and looks at the world from a pinnacle of sorrow and as she does she is sustained by another who is there as support and comfort, commissioned to care for her, to take her home and build up the broken heart that beats within. Are we able to take on that role? To nurture and restore what has been damaged, to play our part in healing our fractured world?

Nicodemus; The courage to be drawn in.

Our final character is Nicodemus the man who comes to Jesus by night. We meet him three times in the gospel of John. His is a story of courage, whose final overcoming of his own inhibitions is testimony to that courage as at the end he takes a decision and makes the choice to come and be

identified as a disciple. His is a journey of faith from darkness into light, a journey that our own experiences so often mirror.

It isn't a straightforward journey but one which encounters many obstacles on the way. His journey begins like all journeys do with a question that opens up the possibilities. "How is it possible?" he asks. Of itself it is a question that is simple in its demand, yet its very simplicity belies the immensity of its demand. How can this man be the Son of God? Why does this event this moment, this death matter to the world? How can I make the world understand its significance?

We quickly realise the impact that this question has, and the importance that attaches to it, and we also come to understand how frightening the answer can be, and why we shy away from its consequences.

Each one of us is on this same quest and the pathway that has brought us here, is one lined with experiences and events that have been marked with moments of doubt and hope, and all shades in between. We can easily be knocked off course or find the pathway blocked by something which seems insurmountable but the questions remains nagging away at us "How is it possible?" It won't go away, it won't leave us in peace, and we have to come back to it time and time again. And so Nicodemus goes off, he thinks about who he is, what it means for him and his life, and he ponders on the words of Jesus *When I am lifted up I will draw all men to myself*. Who could imagine what this *lifting up* could mean, surely not the cross?

How is it possible that the love that God has for the world finds its fulfilment in this event, this lifting up? How is the question "How is it possible" answered by a death of brutal and horrendous sorrow?

- Because the cross tells us ultimately what our human life is all about, and any one of our own failures and experiences of failure draw us to it.
- Because the cross disturbs our own sense of innocence; we all know that we let things happen that shouldn't and feel no sense of guilt.
- Because the cross says forget this man – he is written out of history. But history can't annihilate or forget him.
- Because the cross tells of the solidarity of God with us. There is no distance that God will not go to ensure his place besides us which includes the grave.

This is why Nicodemus comes at the moment of burial to move out of the dark into the light. He has answered the question he posed and so his courage has brought to where he stands. May we exhibit such courage.

The Stations of the Cross.

We have today been asking a question. Who am I Lord? Pondering on the place where I should stand in the passion, and we've looked at a number of people who were there, and saw what took place. As we go around the stations, we'll look to reflect on them again and as we do let us seek to place the context of that reflection into our own hearts and into our own situations.

1. The first station: Jesus is condemned to death

This is Pilate abandoning his responsibility. Back and forth he has gone, in and out of the courtyard. Every time he becomes more agitated, more confused, more unable to comprehend. Why does Jesus make no reply, why will he not speak to me? How can I help him if he refuses to respond? So he submits to the clamour of the crowd, and he gives them what they want. He has washed his hands of the whole affair and it is not his business any longer.

Pilate had Jesus brought out and seated him on the chair of judgement at a place called the Pavement in Hebrew Gabatha. It was preparation day and about the sixth hour. "Here is your King" said Pilate to the Jews. But they shouted "Away with him, Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your King?" Pilate said. The Chief Priests answered "We have no king but Caesar" So Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. (Jn. 19 v13-16)

2. The second station: Jesus receives the cross

The burdens which we carry, whatever they may be, can be overwhelming and the moment arrives when we no longer feel able to cope and we ask why this has happened. What justification is there for allowing this to happen? Couldn't God have done something about it, made things different? And we think of Martha and Mary as they mourned for the loss of their beloved brother. Here is God's answer.

Come unto me all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. (Mt 11 v28-30)

3. The third station; Jesus falls for the first time

Heaviness and weight are not just physical realities. We can also struggle with the mental side of our lives; think of Judas in his betrayal. What mental anguish and torment he must have gone through following his own decision. Our own struggle with our faith and the turmoil it sometimes throws at us will cause us to fall under the weight of anxiety and stress, as we flail about for clarity and answers to our own personal demons.

Are there not twelve hours in the day? No-one who walks in the daytime stumbles, having the light of this world to see by; anyone who walks around at night stumbles having no light as a guide. (Jn 11v10)

4. The fourth station; Jesus meets his mother

Bonded by love, bound by kinship, in spite of all, our family ties and relationships are precious and we should do all we can to keep open the lines that connect us. Sadly there are ruptures and breakdowns which go unhealed and stretch beyond the grave, where only God can heal and resolve. No heart should remain broken, perplexed or unsure.

They were overcome when they saw him, and his mother said to him "My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your Father and I have been looking for you" He replied "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he meant. He went down with them and came to Nazareth and lived under their authority. His mother stored up all these things in her heart (Lk 2 v48-52)

5. The fifth Station; Simon of Cyrene shares the burden of the cross

Just in the wrong place at the wrong time really, not meant to be here at all. We can't always explain why things happen in the way they do, or why events pan out to follow a certain path. A chance encounter, something catches your eye and you stop to look, and it sets in motion a whole new train of events. So it was for this outsider, this visitor from Cyrene and his life was changed. We must never exclude the possibility that the Holy Spirit is at work in us, however close or distant we may feel, we will be led to the place where we should stand.

Do not be surprised when I say: You must be born from above. The wind blows where it please; you can hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it come from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. (Jn 3v7-8)

6. The sixth station: Veronica wipes the face of Jesus

As we look around whose face do we see, Pilate, Judas, Peter, and so on. What are they doing, who are they looking at, and what are they saying? Eyes averted, can we look on the face of the man of sorrows as we stand among the cast of characters. Or is that face too just another in the crowd? Every face of every person is present, all nuanced with emotion, some fully aware, some unconcerned and most not bothered at all, indifferent, apathetic.

He said to them: "Hand me a denarius and let me see it. "Whose image is this? Whose title?" They said to him, "Caesar's." Jesus said to them, "Pay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and God what belongs to God." (Mk 12v15-17)

7. The seventh station: Jesus falls the second time

It is a fact that the weight of expectations can cause us to fall, perhaps no more spectacularly experienced than by Peter. His boasting of his certainty not to allow Jesus to walk the way of the cross is harshly exposed by the crow of a cockerel. We must be careful not to load on to others things we have no right to expect.

"Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" They replied, "We can." He said to them, "Very well; you shall drink my cup, but as for seats at my right and my left, these are not mine to grant; they belong to the those to whom they have been allotted by my Father." (Mt 20v22-23)

8. The eighth station: Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem

This journey of the cross is truly a journey of life and encompasses all that life embodies and so we cannot come and stand in its midst and not shed our tears. Through our mass media, we see so much of the sorrow and trauma that people suffer in their lives, to the extent that its effect becomes negated, and we become almost immune. Martha and Mary felt the loss of their brother but put their trust in the one who shed tears for his friend.

Mary went to Jesus and as soon as she saw him she threw herself at his feet saying: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." At the sight of her tears and those of the Jews who had come with her, Jesus was greatly distressed and with a profound sigh he said, "Where have you put him?" They said, "Lord come and see." Jesus wept. (Jn 11v32-36)

9. The ninth station: Jesus falls for the third time

The falling away of Judas, the falling away of Peter, what now is left except the collapse of the one we have come to observe. Is the burden too much?

This is my commandment to you: love one another as I have loved you. No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I shall no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father. (Jn 15v12-15)

10. The tenth station: Jesus is stripped of his garments

If there is one emotion which this passion exposes then it is vulnerability. None of those about whom we are thinking could have ignored it and nor should we. Coming to take our place on this canvass inevitably opens us up to so many taunts and accusations that we feel helpless to rebut.

"When they take you before synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how to defend yourselves or what to say because when the time comes, the Holy Spirit will teach you what you should say." (Lk 12v11-12)

11. The eleventh station: Jesus is nailed to the cross

How can you stand aloof at this time? How can you intervene? What protest should we make? Here we stand, but what stance do we take? Here we see what human beings are capable of. Here we see Pilate's question answered in shocking and brutal terms. Our eyes are opened; are we ashamed?

"So if anyone declares himself for me in the presence of men, I will declare myself for him in the presence of my father in heaven (Mt 12v32)

12. The twelfth station: Jesus dies on the cross

It is now at its end and the one who has been lifted up bows his head. It is accomplished and the work, the task of the Church begins as we are drawn to this moment. Pilate has returned to his palace, Judas has been lost in his torment, and Peter rendered bewildered by his own weakness. Martha and Mary shed their tears once more, Simon baffled by the whole series of events. Only

Mary remains at the foot of the cross, while Nicodemus hovers in the background. Do I find my place or not?

If anyone wants to be a follower of mine let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it, but anyone who loses his life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it. (Mk 8v34-35)

13. The thirteenth station: Jesus is taken down from the cross

The journey of Jesus into our human condition is now complete and now Nicodemus who will come with his spices and ointments has his question “How is this possible?” answered. For if this death was not real, then Jesus would not be *like us in all things but sin*. Jesus has laid down his life so that all may be drawn to him.

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest. (Jn 12v24)

14. The fourteenth station : Jesus is laid in the grave

What is our reaction now? What response could we possibly make? To turn and to walk away unmoved and unaffected? Such a reaction seems unreal and yet that is what so often takes place. We came to stand and to watch. To ask *who am I* amongst all the other myriad of characters. Where I should stand in this landscape? We are the only ones who can answer. We are called to show our courage and to place our trust in God because we believe that this place is not an ending sealed in silence, but a beginning ready to burst forth with a love and a life so abundant that it overcomes all our doubts.

Jesus said to Mary “Take the stone away”. Martha the dead man’s sister said, “Lord by now he will smell this is the fourth day since he died.” Jesus replied, “Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?” (Jn 11v39-40)

Let us pray

Lord God, we came here today to prepare for Holy Week and to pray for your love and guidance. In our following of your Son help us to discern our path that you may show us how you wish us to witness to your Son in our lives and among those we live with. Give us the grace to put our trust in your Word and the courage to stand up for the values of the gospel. We thank you for the love we have shared here today and ask for your blessing this Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our Father

Hail Mary

Glory be

The Lord be with you

May Almighty God bless you ...

Go in peace.