

PALM SUNDAY St MICHAEL and St GEORGE St LOUIS 25TH MARCH '18

“Truly this was the Son of God”.

So confessed the Centurion. And he was right and he was wrong.

Right , because this hard-bitten and experienced army officer had his eyes opened to the true nature of this convicted and crucified man; and wrong, because Well, let me leave that to the end!

The Centurion would have seen many people die. Some in war on the battlefield; some as condemned criminals on the scaffold of a cross. As he watched Jesus die he would have had hundreds of other deaths with which to compare the manner of his dying. He heard and saw something unique that convinced him that here was no ordinary human being. It was the way that Jesus suffered that convinced the Centurion of his divinity. That’s the opposite of what you would have expected.

If Jesus were divine you’d have expected the Son of God to jump down from the cross like some escapologist. Indeed, some said it out aloud, “If he’s God’s Son let God deliver him”. In other words, just like the Devil in the wilderness, “Show us your true colours, prove your divine nature, throw yourself down and the angels will catch you”.

But no! Jesus reveals his true self not through exercising super human powers, not through behaving like some epic superman. He proves his divinity by the way he suffers.

The spiritual torment of feeling abandoned, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”; the physical pain of a crucified body wracked with thirst. Through all this anguish he aches with love for his mother and for his beloved friend; he is filled with pity as he prays the Father to forgive his enemies and executioners.

Here is God in human form. It is compelling, convincing and incontrovertible. That's what convinces the Centurion – and me.

I have some dear friends who are Muslims. We have worked together on the common cause found in both the Koran and the Bible to care for God's creation. But this is a point of difference. Muslims find the idea of the Son of God being crucified impossible to understand for they rightly cannot bear the thought of God suffering in the flesh. Christians also find it difficult to believe but realising that suffering is in the nature of things we are comforted that God has descended to the depths of being human even to the point of suffering pain spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically. (I will speak more of this in Holy Week).

Jesus once insisted to his followers, "It behoves the Son of Man to suffer many things". In other words, it's in the nature of being human that we all suffer in some way and at some stage; it's also in the nature of being God to suffer with the human family created in the image of God.

We believe in a God who tires, who thirsts, who weeps, who suffers.

Many years ago when our three children were very small I was taken into hospital. It was life-threatening. In the early hours of the morning they would change the intravenous drip. The early hours silence in the twilight made me feel all the more a sense of desolation, and that God must be a million miles away.

Some weeks after leaving hospital I was walking past the infant school at the end of our road. I could hear a child crying on the other side of the tall wall and a teacher trying to console her but to no avail. I was then stopped in my tracks when I suddenly realised that the infant who was crying was my own child! Part of me wanted to leap over the wall and take her in my arms and tell her that Daddy's here and its going to be all right.

Another part of me knew I could do no such thing! If every time she got hurt I catapulted myself into her life how would she grow? How would she learn to trust other people? How would she begin to discover her own inner resources? How would she ever learn to trust God? So with a very heavy heart I had to walk on by. Did I love her the less? No. I loved her the more. But in that moment of suffering with a tall wall dividing us I had to trust her to a greater purpose, to a grander scheme in which all human suffering is redeemed by the God who himself became the 'man of sorrows, acquainted with grief'.

The Centurion was right and he was wrong. Wrong because he said 'was'!

On this Palm Sunday where each and everyone of us knows, albeit in different ways, what it means to suffer we have raised our hands and palms and hailed the Suffering King, the Servant Lord. He is not dead. He is alive. Broken down the barrier of death. He is here. Present. In Word and Sacrament. Manifest in our midst.

Palm Sunday isn't just a re-enactment of the past. It is acclamation and adoration in the present of the Son of God.

He loves us and died for each of us.

And we, yes with fickle and feeble hearts, love him too. And we say, 'this palm is for you', this is the sign of my love, this is the token of my life.