

Our Blessed Mother

Friday 8th May 2020



May is the month traditionally associated with Our Lady. Winter is over and we are well into spring. The sun is making a more frequent appearance, the leaves are covering the trees and many of the flowers are bursting open into spectacular blooms. Everything is fresh and full of life. This is why we remember Mary in May because, through her total 'Yes' to God, she brought Life into the world.

During our parish Lenten retreat this year, Fr. Michael Doody showed us how fundamental Our Blessed Mother is to our spiritual life. She was given to us as a gift by the Lord himself at the Cross.

'Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. Seeing his mother and the disciple he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his mother, 'Woman, this is your son.' Then to the disciple he said, 'This is your mother'. And from that moment the disciple made a place for her in his home.' (Jn 19: 25-27).

The disciple represents us. By giving his mother into the care of the disciple, Jesus was giving her to us. She is our second mum who cherishes us because of her son's love for us. A love that, even when he was on his way to calvary carrying his cross to die a painful death, did not waver.



We know that not only does our heavenly Mother love us but that she cares deeply for us and is always interceding to God on our behalf.

‘Three days later there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee. The mother of Jesus was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited. When they ran out of wine, since the wine provided for the wedding had all finished, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ Jesus said, ‘Woman, why turn to me? My hour has not come yet.’

His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ (Jn 2:1–6)

The wedding couple do not yet realise that their special day is about to be ruined. Their hospitality to all the wedding guests is about to be marred because the wine has finished. They will be judged, criticised and the joy of the occasion will turn to frustration. Mary sees all this and turns to her son. Nobody asks her, she simply sees the need and intercedes. Jesus’ answer seems on the surface very dismissive but Mary is not put off. She has asked on behalf of the bride and groom for help and she knows it will be given hence her words to the servants: *‘Do whatever he tells you.’* Trust in Mary, because she is always interceding on our behalf, to have our cares met and to bring us closer in our relationship with Jesus her son.

When a priest is ordained one of the beautiful traditions, we have in the Church is that he gives his mother a bouquet of roses after his First Mass. There is a rose for every year of his life. That bouquet is an expression of the new priests love and affection for his mother. He acknowledges, in this gesture of roses, that she has been with him throughout his life supporting him, encouraging and sometimes reprimanding him for his own good!



We too should give a bouquet to our Blessed Mother. That bouquet should also contain roses, the spiritual roses of the Rosary. It is very easy to say we have a great love for Mary, and deep devotion to her but words are cheap if they are not carried out in actions. The Rosary is one of those devotions that the Church has always strongly promoted because it expresses an authentic love for Our Lady.

"Give me an army saying the Rosary and I will conquer the world."

Blessed Pope Pius IX

"The greatest method of praying is to pray the Rosary."

Saint Francis de Sales

"Some people are so foolish that they think they can go through life without the help of the Blessed Mother. Love the Madonna and pray the rosary, for her Rosary is the weapon against the evils of the world today. All graces given by God pass through the Blessed Mother."

Saint Padre Pio

"Say the Holy Rosary. Blessed be that monotony of Hail Mary's which purifies the monotony of your sins!"

Saint Josemaria Escriva

"The Rosary is a powerful weapon to put the demons to flight and to keep oneself from sin...If you desire peace in your hearts, in your homes, and in your country, assemble each evening to recite the Rosary. Let not even one day pass without saying it, no matter how burdened you may be with many cares and labours."

Pope Pius XI

"The Rosary is the most excellent form of prayer and the most efficacious means of attaining eternal life. It is the remedy for all our evils, the root of all our blessings. There is no more excellent way of praying."

Pope Leo XIII

"The Rosary is a prayer both so humble and simple and theologically rich in Biblical content. I beg you to pray it."

Saint John Paul II

"There is no problem, I tell you, no matter how difficult it is, that we cannot solve by the prayer of the Holy Rosary."

Sister Lucia, of the seers of Fatima

"The Rosary is a prayer that always accompanies me; it is also the prayer of the ordinary people and the saints... it is a prayer from my heart."

Pope Francis

"I take refuge, then, in prayer, and turn to Mary, and our Lord always triumphs."

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux

As we can see from the above quotes, from Saints, Mystics and Pope's, the practice of the Rosary has been highly recommended and encouraged. However, that does not make it an easy prayer especially if we are tired, distracted and not confident in praying it.

I thought we could all help each other and through the month of May begin to pray the Rosary together as a parish. Taking it step by step and reflecting on the various mysteries and how through them we are brought closer to Jesus. Every day next week (starting Monday 11th May) and with the help of John, our parish webmaster, I'll give a reflection on one mystery a day beginning with the Joyful. Maybe as a parish we could give time to pray a decade each day with the intention of all those in our St. Mary's family. Why not pray that decade with other people in your home, over the phone with a friend or print off the reflection for someone you know who has no access to the internet.

I invite you to prepare yourselves for this *St. Mary's Parish Family Rosary* by simply picking up your beads and looking at them. As you do, ask yourself these questions: Who gave you these beads? Did you buy them and where from? When was the last time you used them? Was it during a difficult time or did you use them to give thanks to God for a blessing? Have you ever properly used them? Who taught you to pray? Who taught you the Rosary? Is Mary a part of your prayer life? Does she feel remote, distant and goddess like? Do you feel comfortable in her presence? Do you talk to her naturally about your worries and trust her with your troubles?



Let us now turn to Mary, Queen of Peace, to pray for those who are struggling at this time because of the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Lord, may your mother pray for us.

Let us pray for those suffering from any form of abuse, hunger & need.

Lord, may your mother pray for us.

Let us pray for those who are not coping during this period of isolation.

Lord, may your mother pray for us.

Let us pray for each other that one day we will be reunited again at the foot of the Altar before the Presence of Christ in the Tabernacle.

Lord, may your mother pray for us.

Let us also pray today as VE Day is commemorated. We pray for all those souls who have died in war and conflict.

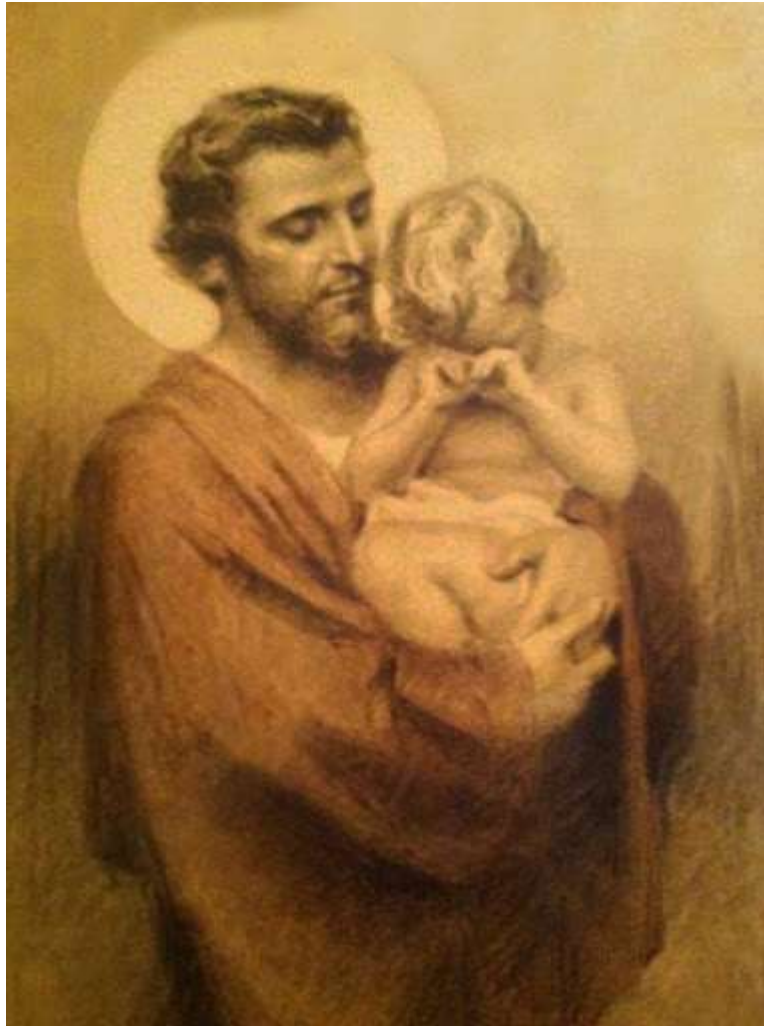
Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

I'll publish our first reflection of the Rosary on Monday. Though we may not be able to see each other at this time our prayers will join us together.

God Bless and keep praying

Fr. O'Brien

Saint Joseph
Friday 1st May 2020



The last public Mass celebrated at St. Mary's was now over six weeks ago on Thursday 19th March! It was the Solemnity of St. Joseph. His second Feastday, is coming up on Friday 1st May and is known as the 'Feast of St. Joseph the Worker'. I thought it was appropriate then to talk about this wonderful saint who is a gift to us all, given by God Himself.

After Our Lady, St. Joseph is one of *thee* most holiest saints ever! That is a powerful statement but one that the Church confirms by giving him the title of '*Protector of the Holy Church*'. From the millions of saints that have lived only one is trusted enough to protect the Church and that is St Joseph because of his powerful intercession and holiness of life.

St. Joseph protected and saved the lives of Jesus and Mary. He saved their lives! Name another saint who has ever done that? Who else can claim such a thing?

‘...The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother with you, and escape to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you, because Herod intends to search for the child and do away with him.’ So Joseph got up and, taking the child and his mother with him, left that night for Egypt.’

(Mt. 2:13–14b)

As Herod began his murderous act of slaughtering all those innocent ones who were two years of age and under, St. Joseph took the Christ child and Our Lady and brought them safely to Egypt. His actions were instant and selfless. He did not argue with the angel of the Lord saying, ‘I can’t leave I have a business in Nazareth, I have customers orders to fulfil.’ He didn’t complain and say, ‘Egypt! Is there not a safe place nearer to home, a place with other people of the same religion, the same language and the same culture?’ No. When God placed Mary and Jesus into the care of St. Joseph, it was then that his faith shone. It was then that we saw a faith not superficial or conditional but real, heart centred, obedient and revealed in action.



St. Joseph, God's guardian of His most precious treasures, was somebody who was not only full of faith but of life. He was not some feeble, ageing servant as some images portray him, but strong and youthful. Mother Angelica, the famous founder of the Catholic Television Network EWTN, once said: 'Old Men don't walk to Egypt!' Joseph, this strong and healthy husband cared for his wife and the Christ child in that foreign country of Egypt. He protected them, provided for them and most importantly loved them. As God the Father entrusted this man to care for His Son and the Blessed Virgin let us also ask for his intercession and help especially for friends and family at this time. Let's ask St. Joseph to love and protect them as he did for the rest of the Holy Family.

We all know about the Annunciation, we even have a wood carving of it on the reredos of the High Altar at church. It's that moment when the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive and bear God's Son. Our Lady's response is an emphatic 'YES'. But let's not forget the Annunciation of St. Joseph.



'...The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit.' (Mt.1: 20)

To put Joseph's annunciation into context and understand the truths it reveals for us today we have to begin by looking at the marriage customs of first century Judaism. Mary and Joseph were married. Once a couple were betrothed (Mt. 1:18) in this ancient culture they entered into a legal marriage covenant. For the first year of their marriage they would live apart as husband and wife. When Mary's pregnancy was revealed to Joseph he knew that the child was not his. His response was to 'divorce her informally' (Mt 1:19b). This can appear as a weakness in Joseph's character, an understandable flaw, but let's look closer.

The great theologian St. Thomas Aquinas and the mystic St. Bernard of Clairvaux both described the '*reverence*' shown by St. Joseph in this episode of the Gospel. Joseph loved Mary. He knew the purity of her heart, the total devotion of her faith in God, the innocence of her life and therefore he never thought once that she had been adulterous. They were husband and wife, a union blessed by God, and they knew everything about each other. They were in a committed and loving relationship. Joseph knew, through Mary and later confirmed by the angel of the Lord, that the child she carried was God's. Out of unworthiness and humility he decided to follow the Old Mosaic Law and divorce Mary because, in his initial thinking, he regarded himself as having no right even to be in the presence of the Mother of God let alone the soon to be born Messiah. He felt he was disrespecting the Lord if he continued in a marriage with God's chosen woman who was far above him in grace. Who was he but a lowly carpenter from Nazareth. It is at the Annunciation of St. Joseph where this humble saint, like Mary at her Annunciation, is told not to be afraid because God has chosen him to look after Mary and her unborn baby and raise the child as his own.

'When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home...' (Mt.1:24)



Let us ask St. Joseph to help us live a life of genuine humility like he did. It is only when we live humbly, when we come back to earth and are rooted in God that we truly begin to grow both in faith and in our humanity. To walk in the humility of St. Joseph is to see the love and mercy the Almighty has for us; to recognise our need of Him in finding true peace and happiness; to understand the paths and roads he calls us to follow on our earthly pilgrimage, both easy and difficult.

For me personally, this Friday will be the end of a 33 day prayer of consecration to St. Joseph. Part of this time has been asking the Holy Spirit to help me imitate the life and virtues of St. Joseph so that I can be a better man, a better parish Father, a better adorer of Our Lady and a better servant of Jesus Christ. During this global crisis and our present lockdown situation I have found great consolation from the intercession of St. Joseph knowing that as the '*Protector of the Holy Church*' he is also protecting our parish family, which is dedicated to his beloved spouse Mary.

Once church re-opens I intend to place an Icon of St. Joseph in the chapel of Our Lady of Oswaldtwistle in thanksgiving that the doors of God's house have been opened. I also intend (when it is not a solemnity, feastday, memoria or funeral) to celebrate a votive Mass for St. Joseph each Wednesday, the traditional day given to him in the Roman Catholic Church. We say Mass every Saturday morning at the Lady Altar honouring our Blessed Mother, I think it is only right to honour her most chaste spouse and guardian – the carpenter of Nazareth, our spiritual father and protector.

The Memorare of St. Joseph

**Remember, O Most Chaste Spouse of the Virgin Mary, that never was it known
that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy
intercession was left unaided.**

**Inspired by this confidence, I fly to you, my spiritual father, and beg your
protection.**

**O Foster Father of the Redeemer, despise not my petitions, but in your goodness
hear and answer me. Amen.**

God Bless and keep praying.

St. Joseph, our spiritual father and protector, pray for us.

Fr. O'Brien

Third Sunday of Easter

26th April 2020

I was struck by a simple sentence in today's Gospel from Luke. It's the '*Road to Emmaus*' which recalls two disciples walking from Jerusalem. They are talking about the death of Jesus and the rumours concerning the empty tomb. In the middle of their conversation they encounter a stranger on the road. The unknown traveller joins them for the rest of their journey and begins to unpack the scriptures, explaining them clearly. As the day comes to an end the two companions invite the man to rest and eat with them. Before the meal begins the stranger breaks and blesses the bread and immediately as he does so the other two recognise who their guest is – Jesus, the Lord!



The line that struck me from this Gospel passage is near the beginning.

'They [The two disciples] stopped short, their faces downcast.' (Lk 24:17b)

That line for me is heartbreaking because it resonates with the reality, we are all facing at this moment in time. This is the season of Easter and yet it is a season that, at the present moment, seems lost and hidden away. The momentous days of the Easter Triduum culminating in *the* Mass of the whole year, The Easter Vigil, seems to have come and gone like a thief in the night. Rather than spiritual joy at the Resurrection there is a downcast atmosphere because of the suffering and death that Covid-19 is causing. Days merge into one another, irritations fester and grow, some folk battle with boredom while others cope with stress and anxiety. Life has stopped short and Easter seems to have been a non-event.

Yet for those two disciples trudging along that road, a road made all the more arduous because of their downcast hearts and troubled spirits, they encounter hope. Real Hope. Hope, not as in a psychological state of mind to assist getting through a 'bad patch' but hope as in a real person. The person of Jesus Christ. The travellers have been crushed by the death of the Lord, they are in a state of confusion over hearing about an empty tomb and feel like outcasts because people recognise them as followers of the dead 'Teacher from Nazareth'. Life has stopped short and all that they held to be true seems false, pointless and empty. However, it is in the experience of meeting Jesus on the road that transformation takes place and hope becomes real. It is in the very encounter of listening to the Lord and talking with him that hope springs forth. It is in the very presence of Christ, especially at the breaking of bread, that they see the face of hope.

When we see and hear the figures in regards to how many people have died because of the Coronavirus it is tragic. The numbers are so big that it is easy to become complacent and forget that behind the daily total of deaths is an individual, a life, a family, a story. Today, living in this pandemic, we are walking in the footsteps of those two downcast disciples. Footsteps that are sad and confused about life but footsteps that will soon be joined by another. Another who we know will make the journey lighter and bring encouragement because that 'other' is our hope, he is Jesus Our Lord.



There is a great sermon I came across the other day from one of the early church Fathers that beautifully illustrates the power of hope found in the Lord, especially at this time when the death toll due to Covid-19 is so high.

‘This [The Cross] was the tree on which Christ, like a king on a chariot, destroyed the devil, the Lord of death, and freed the human race from his tyranny. This was the tree upon which the Lord, like a brave warrior wounded in his hands, feet and side, healed the wounds of sin that the evil serpent had inflicted on our nature. A tree once caused our death, but now a tree brings life.’

St. Theodore the Studite

Easter for us as Catholics is not a symbolic time but a season when we remember the concrete reality that Jesus has risen from the dead. Death has no more power over us because Jesus has destroyed it. It does not take away the sadness and grief when someone dies but the hope that Our Lord has given us through the Resurrection lets us know that for the faithful follower there is more to come.

I’ve just finished reading a book called *‘A Time To Die: Monks on the Threshold of Eternal Life.’* The author, Nicolas Diat, travelled around various monasteries in France asking monks about death. How they understand it, live with it and deal with it. One of the last monastic communities that Diat visited was The Grande Chartreuse Monastery, home to one of the strictest monastic orders of the Catholic Church – the Carthusians. He received this wisdom from one of the monk’s there called Dom Innocent.

“You had asked me if I were waiting for death. I did not say yes right away, for a basically obvious reason: it is not the door I am waiting for, but what is on the other side of the door. I am not waiting for death, but for Life.”

Dom Innocent is a man who has walked down the Emmaus road like all of us. He has known, as a human being, the ups and downs of life, the struggles and tragedies, the joys and downcast days. What has sustained him on the road of life is the same person who caused the two disciples in the Gospel to say:

‘Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us.’ (Lk 24:32)

The same traveller whose encounter changed them for the better; the same stranger who transformed their darkness into the light; the same guest who revealed in the breaking of bread the presence of the Risen Lord.

For myself I want to continue to grow in faith, and hope, and love, each day. I want to make that Carthusian monks prayer my own prayer. The prayer that does not fear the door that we all must pass through one day but to focus and desire the person beyond the door – Jesus, my Lord and my God. Brothers and Sisters never give up, no matter how bleak life may seem and always have faith in the Risen Lord who will never abandon us if our hearts are set on him for all time.

I've asked John Hughes, our webmaster, to put a new category on the website entitled '*Requiescat in Pace*'. This will be for those who have died recently and we will put their names in this section, asking people to pray for their souls and the families who are in mourning them. The names will be deleted at the start of each month.

God Bless and keep praying

Fr. O'Brien

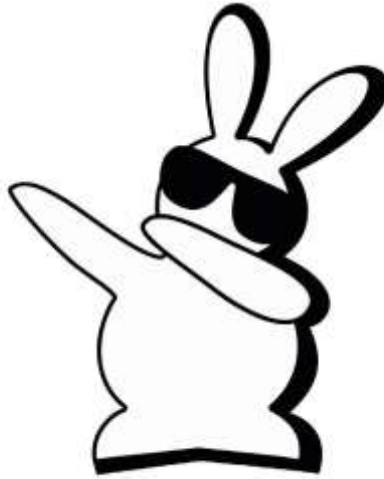
A Message for all our Young People at St. Mary's

Thursday 23rd April 2020

To all our young parishioners,

How are you all? I've not seen any of you in ages but I know you are all out there because of the lovely home-made Easter cards you sent, the chocolates left at my door and the kind voicemail recordings on the presbytery phone.

Here is a joke for you. What is the Easter Bunny's favourite kind of music?



Hip-Hop of course!

A bit of a naff joke I know but I bet you cracked a smile – even if only briefly! At the moment things are not very normal in the world are they? With this Coronavirus everyone is having to do things a bit different. Everything that we are use to has changed from school, shopping, playing out and meeting our friends. And when things in life change that can be a bit scary and frustrating. Have you had some sad days?

I would like to tell you a story about Saint George whose special day it is today. He, like us, believed in Jesus and wanted to follow him. George lived in a world that could be a bit scary but because he prayed, Jesus became his friend and gave him the gifts of courage, strength and protection.



Saint George was a Roman Soldier who lived a long time ago in the Middle East. He had heard people talk about God and decided to find out for himself who God was and why people believed in Him. He came to a church and found it packed with people singing and listening to the Bible. The singing made George smile because the words spoke about God who was the Creator of the whole world. The words of the hymn described how God made the universe from the highest mountain to the distant oceans. From the fruitful forests to the barren deserts. From the wildest beasts to the tamest pet. God even made human beings and blessed them with life because He loved them so much.



Then George listened to what was being read aloud from the Bible for all the people to hear. It was from the Gospel of St. John:

‘God loved the world so much that he gave us His only Son, Jesus, so that all who believe in him will have real life for ever and ever.’

George continued to listen to the Gospel and heard how Jesus healed people who were sick, gave people a second chance when they had done wrong by forgiving them, and taught them about God and how to live as children of God.

George was so moved by what he heard and saw, especially how all the people in church were trying to copy Jesus and live like him. He too decided to become a follower and asked if he could be baptised that very day and become a Christian.

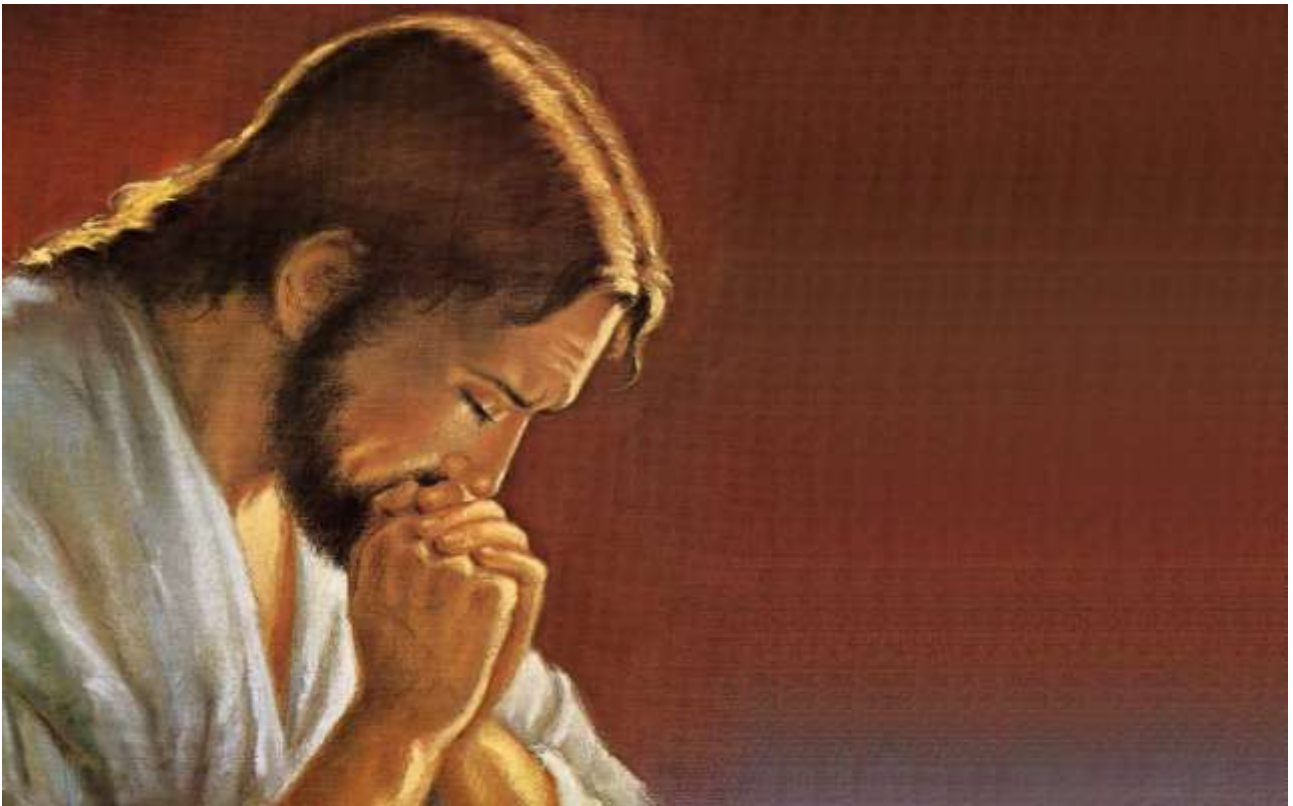


However, there were some nasty people who called George for believing in God and following Jesus. They tormented and bullied him but George, to their surprise, would not react. Anything they could do to distract him from praying or stop him from helping others, well, George just simply ignored! How? Because he had the gifts of courage, strength and protection from his new friend the Lord Jesus.



Often in pictures of Saint George you see him battling and defeating an ugly dragon. The dragon represents all those horrible things in life that can scare and upset us. What dragons are there in your life that try to frighten you? Is it the sadness of not seeing your family and friends? Not being able to have a hug off your gran or play with your grandad? Is the dragon the loneliness you feel when you can't play with your friends or go out with your family? Or is the dragon the anger that wells up inside you and explodes into hurtful words to those people around you? The dragon that upsets me is not being able to visit my family and see my nephews. Whatever the dragon is in our lives we can defeat it just like St. George in the picture above. How? By praying!

Jesus can't help us or others unless we speak to him. He can't give us those gifts of courage, strength and protection unless we ask him. He can't reassure us and give us hope unless we tell him what is worrying us. Jesus is always wanting to listen and help us but he can only do that if we talk to him in prayer. That's what prayer is – just talking to Jesus.



Today, draw a picture of you and St. George on a horse defeating that dragon which worries you. Then put that picture somewhere you can see it everyday and pray. Pray to Jesus and talk to him like your best friend. Ask him for those gifts of courage, strength and protection. Make sure you also ask St. George in heaven to pray for everyone in our country to be good to each other and look after each other.

God Bless and I hope to see you soon, keep praying.

Happy Saint George's Day.

Fr. O'Brien

Divine Mercy Sunday

19th April 2020



The French artist Jacques-Louis David painted the above portrait of Napoleon Bonaparte between 1801–1805. It is commonly titled '*Napoleon Crossing the Alps*.' The artist expresses, with out a shadow of doubt, the enigmatic figure of Napoleon who conquered so much of Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Upon his horse the emperor comes across as both commanding and formidable. However there is a wonderful story about Bonaparte that shows another side of his character not revealed in this portrait.

A mother once fell at the knees of Napoleon begging for pardon for her son. The boy in question was a soldier who had more than once deserted his regiment. The emperor replied that the young man, as well as absconding without permission from the army, had also committed a number of other offences and the justice to be delivered was death.

"*But I don't ask for justice?*", said the mother. "*I plead for mercy.*"

"*But your son does not deserve mercy.*" Napoleon replied.

"*Sir,*" the woman cried, "*it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for.*"

"Well, then," the emperor said, "*I will have mercy.*" And he spared the woman's son.

Mercy cannot be earned, bought, taken or ever deserved. It is a gift freely given as Napoleon demonstrated to the pleading mother. This Second Sunday of Easter we are reminded of God's mercy for all of us. In the Gospel today (Jn 20:19–31), Our Lord grants authority to the disciples to share his divine mercy with others.

'He said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so am I sending you." After saying this he breathed on them and said:

"Receive the Holy Spirit.

For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven;

for those whose sins you retain, they are retained." (Jn 20:21–23)

The Sacrament of Confession is instituted and firmly established through Jesus' authority, bestowed on the Apostles. Jesus wants the Easter mystery not to be confined to a memory, an historical past event but something real, alive and active transcending all time. He wants to give life to all those in darkness. He wants to raise up all those in the tomb. He wants to cleanse and renew them through the forgiveness of their sins. From the Cross he has washed us with his blood and he wants this, his life giving blood, to awaken us and bring us back to real life. We are blessed to have this wonderful and tangible gift of Jesus' mercy in the Sacrament.

We in turn are asked to be people who forgive and show mercy to others. To receive mercy is wonderful but to share and give it to others, especially to those who we find difficult is a challenge! During the reign of Elizabeth I the Church in England was persecuted. St. Edmund Campion, a priest and eventually a martyr for the Faith, was betrayed and arrested. While in prison he was visited by the man who had betrayed him. Not only did St. Edmund forgive his betrayer, he also urged him to leave England where he might be in danger himself, and gave him a letter of safe-conduct to a Catholic nobleman in Germany. St. Edmund Campion showed true mercy, even to his own Judas, because he had experienced Jesus' mercy himself.



Within our own parish of St. Mary's there are many people who are becoming disciples of mercy through their own loving actions. Over the past few weeks I have been contacted by people offering their services to help others who might be experiencing some difficulties during the lockdown. As a result of this generous self-giving, a number of vulnerable people are now getting their shopping done. Others have found the present Covid-19 emergency psychologically a worrying time. Again, thanks to kind parishioners we have been able to share, following GDPR guidelines and the law, contact details so that either through phones calls, video links or email people are able to communicate with others. There are acts of mercy taking place each and every day that are not public or will ever be recorded but again each act is a burst of light in the darkness of the tomb. Each deed of loving mercy is a witness to the power of Jesus Christ, even in the most difficult and challenging of times. Alleluia!

If you would like to volunteer to help another parishioner, in any way, living in the parish boundary then please do email sean.obrien@dioceseofsalford.org.uk My sincere thanks to all those who are doing so much now.

I would like to appeal to your financial mercy. It is not a subject I like talking about but it is an important issue. Thank you to all those who are keeping their offertory envelopes at home and saving them up each week for when they return to Mass. That is the sensible and wise thing to do as we are unable to bank any monies. I am very grateful for the financial sacrifice you are making for St. Mary's especially in these difficult economic times.

Some people are now setting up direct debits/standing orders so that the parish is regularly receiving an income in a very safe and efficient way. If you would like to do this then please contact me.

Another act of mercy is being given by Mgr John Armitage, Director of the Walsingham Shrine. He is about to lead an eight-day retreat via the Walsingham website and its Youtube channel. Each day he will give two talks and there will be plenty of opportunity for prayer. For more details please see the shrines website www.walsingham.org.uk .The retreat will begin this Sunday afternoon (19th April).

May God Bless you all and keep praying.

Happy Easter

Fr. O'Brien

The Resurrection

Wednesday 15th April 2020

It's hard to feel that we have now arrived at Easter. Lockdown still continues, the financial burdens of this crisis are increasingly affecting peoples jobs and livelihoods, the frustration of not being able to see loved ones is causing a great deal of hurt and sadly the numbers of those with Covid-19 seem so large that it's easy to forget that behind each number is a person.

I would like to share something that has given me a lot of hope at the moment because it expresses artistically something that is concrete, real and true. It's an Icon known as '*The descent into Hell*'. I have this image on display in the presbytery oratory at the moment because it draws me into the beautiful mystery of the Lord's Resurrection. (For those who cannot see the Icon please visit the parish website)



The first thing you notice is the person of Our Lord. He stands out, not only because he is at the very centre of the Icon but also because of his brilliant white clothing and his posture of power and strength. The blue almond shape behind him, known as a mandorla, also emphasises his importance and centrality to all that is taking place in the scene. It is right and proper that Jesus is at the very centre of this Icon for he should be the very centre of our lives. St John reminds us why at the start of his Gospel.

***'In the beginning was the Word (Jesus),
the Word (Jesus) was with God,
and the Word (Jesus) was God.
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things came to be,
not one thing had its being but through him.'*** (Jn 1:1–3)

Everything that exists, moves, lives, breathes, is moulded and formed owes its creation to Jesus, the Word of God. The Iconographer is reminding us in this image that we can't push Jesus to one side, bring him out of his box at Christmas and Easter when it suits us, follow him when and how we feel like it. No. Every thought, decision, word and action we make must be in relation to Jesus. To be a Catholic is to walk in his footsteps, to imitate him, to become another Christ to the world around us so that, as St. John quotes the Lord:

'...They may have life and have it to the full.' (Jn 10:10b)

The mandorla, the blue almond shape, behind the Risen Lord represents the Glory of God. Jesus was not just a nice, kind and polite person. He wasn't just a good human being who had some wise teachings. No, No, No. The mandorla reminds us that Jesus was fully God and fully human. He is one person, fully divine and fully human. In his brilliant white clothing he is showing us that he, God, has truly risen not symbolically or metaphorically but that he has truly destroyed the eternal power of death. The new creation has begun. Eden, that paradise that was once lost by Adam is now being restored and made new by Christ, the new Adam.

Death attempts to pervade this Icon. It is hard not to be struck by the pitch black flooring of Hades at the bottom of the picture, the two stone coffins and the jagged rocks at either side creating the sense that the viewer is looking into a deep and formidable cavern, a tomb.

'Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting? Now the sting of death is sin and sin gets its power from the Law. So let us thank God for giving us the victory through Our lord Jesus Christ.' (1 Cor 15:55–57)

Death maybe trying to enter this Icon but as St. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Corinthians, Jesus has destroyed the power of death – ***'Death, where is your***

victory?’ We see this victory under Our Lord’s feet. Those bronze rectangular objects depict the doors of Hell. The Risen Christ has kicked them wide open. How? Well look closely at how the doors have fallen – in the shape of the Cross. Through that great gift of love on Calvary, where Jesus laid down his very life for us victory was gained. The Lord sacrificed his very life for us who are saints and sinners. For us who are cold and unfeeling. For us who are selfish and nasty. For us who judge, criticise and gossip about others. For us who nurse grudges and bitterness. For us who do not forgive, are impatient and cruel. For us who are full of our own self importance, lack genuine humility and worship ourselves rather than the true God. Despite all these flaws and failings Jesus gladly went to the Cross to forgive us all these weaknesses, take them upon himself so that one day we too would die to this life and rise again with him to new and eternal life.

The man and woman that Jesus is lifting up from the two coffins are Adam and Eve. Through their disobedience, their full and free willingness to stop listening to God and follow the devil, they have brought the disease of sin and death into the world. From the black flooring of the Icon, these two figures are raised up towards the central light of the picture – Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life. Covering the black floor are numerous keys, locks and chains which are now all busted, unlocked and smashed. Nothing can bar us from Jesus. At every graveside and at every crematorium, what gives the believer hope is that they will be reunited with the Lord.

‘“I am the Resurrection and the life.” It is Jesus himself who on the last day will raise up those who have believed in him, who have eaten his body and drunk his blood.’

(Catechism of the Catholic Church #994.)

Notice the people around Our Lord. On his right above Adam is John the Baptist. That brave man who stood out from the crowd, who did not conform to how the rest of the world thought you should act or think. That courageous prophet who did not cling to earthly values but to the hope of a Saviour sent by God to restore the broken world and its damaged relationship with God.

‘...And so it was that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.’ (Mk 1:4)

John the Baptist sees in this Icon that his preaching was not for nothing. Here he sees God’s hope made real, the Saviour Jesus Christ, the destroyer of Hell and the giver of true life to all believers. At the end of the lockdown maybe we too could heed John the Baptist and repent and come closer to God. Come back to Confession, the Sacrament that he established, and hear him forgive us, heal us

and give us new life in the grace of his love. Pray for those who do not use his gift of Confession because they remain in the darkness of the tomb.

And finally who are the other two men? From their heads you can tell that they are kings. King David and King Solomon.

'But over the House of David and the citizens of Jerusalem I will pour out a spirit of kindness and prayer. They will look on the one whom they have pierced; they will mourn for him as for an only son, and weep for him as a people weep for a first born child.' (Zech 12:10)

God had promised King David that his dynasty would last forever and as we know this promise was fulfilled because God always keeps his promises. Jesus, through Saint Joseph's guardianship was of the House of David. Here the king sees the true and rightful heir of the kingdom conquering the enemy, the devil. The kingdom that Jesus the victor is establishing is not an earthly political realm but the everlasting Kingdom of God rooted in truth, mercy, justice, peace and real love. Like John the Baptist, King David witnesses God's promise fulfilled.

King Solomon, known for his wisdom, witnesses something said by the Lord to his disciples in the Gospel.

'On Judgement day the Queen of the South will rise up with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and there is something greater than Solomon here.' (Mt 12:42)

The Queen of the South is more familiar to us as the Queen of Sheba, especially after the 1959 Hollywood film '*Solomon and Sheba*', starring Yul Brynner. She travelled a huge distance to meet King Solomon because his God given wisdom was world renowned. The Lord told the disciples that there was someone greater than Solomon before them – Himself, Jesus. The Lord is God's wisdom personified. He is Wisdom and Truth. Throughout history humankind has been seeking and searching for the answers to the great questions of life. The answers to those questions will always been found in Jesus Christ. How many of us look elsewhere for solutions to problems or turn to ourselves in times of crisis? Let's follow the example of the Queen of Sheba and turn to the Lord instead. Let us pray and ask him for help, for guidance and wisdom. King Solomon the wise continues to impart wisdom upon us by pointing to Christ in the Icon and saying quite simply 'Behold Truth Himself.'

Keep praying, keep hoping, keep trusting and keep believing in the Risen Jesus.

God Bless

Fr. O'Brien

Easter Sunday

HE IS RISEN ALLELUIA!



May God Bless you all this Easter and may he fill your hearts with that sure and certain faith that Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Saviour, has truly risen from the dead and offers eternal life for those who would follow him. Alleluia!

Please do know that over these last three days of the Easter Triduum I have prayed my little heart out for you at all the liturgies. There has been incense, chant and bells and at *thee* Easter Vigil Mass last night I offered it up for everyone in the parish. To not to be able to receive Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament is one of the great evils of this virus and so when I made Holy Communion last night I received him on behalf of you all and offered the Sacrament up for your intentions.

Do not loose hope and keep faith. I started the Vigil last night by blessing the Easter Candle at the back of church in darkness. The church became the dark tomb where they laid the body of Jesus. Then once I lit the candle I moved slowly through church stopping three times and chanting '*Lumen Christi - Deo Graias!*' which means - 'The Light of Christ, Thanks be to God'. The darkness of church was dispelled by the flame of the Easter Candle. This prayer at every Easter Vigil draws us into the mystery of the resurrection when in that dark tomb, that grave of death, Life, real Life dispelled the shadow of death for eternity.

We are living in dark times at the moment, but the Easter Candle we all carry is in our faith in Jesus Christ Our Lord. We have to hold on to him, not intellectually or symbolically, but in our hearts and lives. As always I invite you to pray. Sacrifice time and pray to him. Read today's Gospel John 20:1-9 and pray to him. Pick up those Rosary beads and pray to him. Light that candle and pray to him. If we don't turn to the Lord with all our heart and with all our might then how can he ever pull us out of the darkness?

Thank you to those kind parishioners Teresa and Pete Lynch who decorated the lychgate at church for Easter. God Bless you both. Thank you to the many gifts that have arrived outside the presbytery door from an Easter Bunny (chocolate of course) and a bottle of Irish medicine to heal my throat after all the singing and incense!

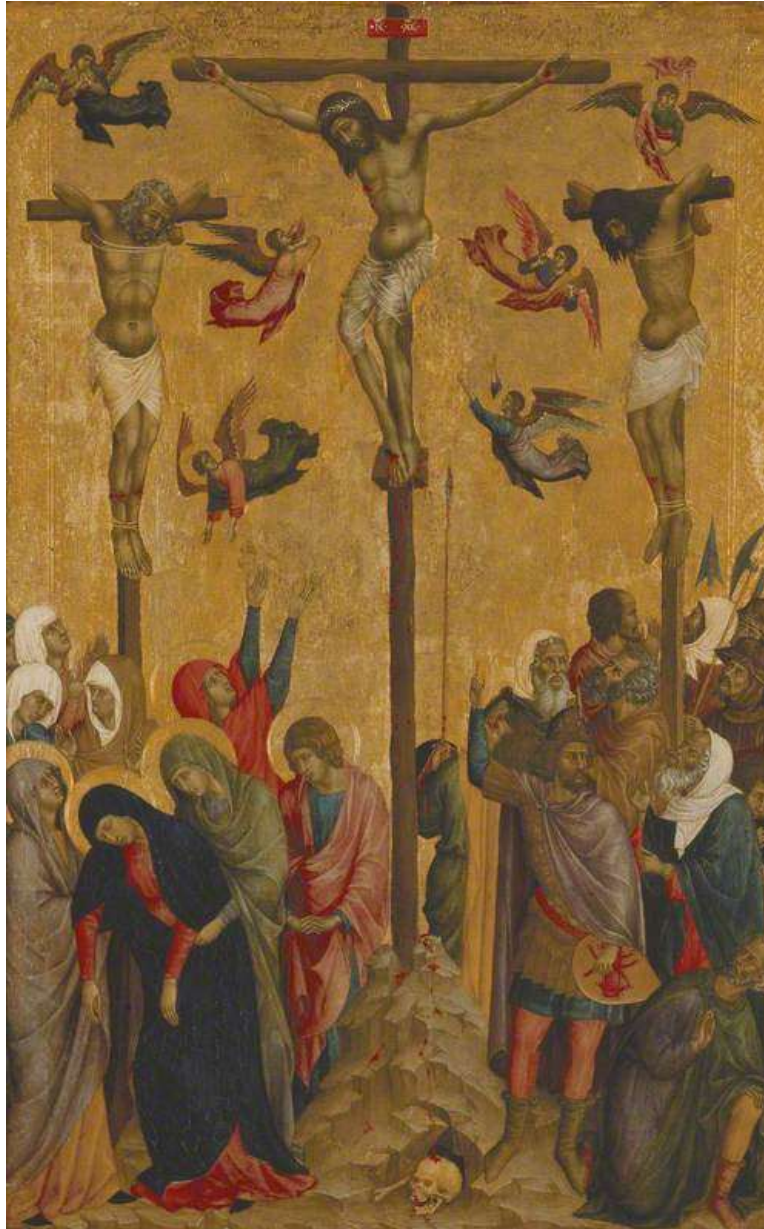
Happy and Holy Easter to you all. He is Risen!

God Bless with my prayers

Fr. O'Brien

Good Friday

10th April 2020



The Altar is stripped bare and the sanctuary of the church is empty at St. Mary's today. There are no flowers, no palms or candles. Today, this day of bitterness and mourning, our attention is focused on the Cross. The Cross where Jesus hangs in suffering for us. The Cross where Christ hangs alone as his disciples from last night have betrayed him, denied him and now abandoned him. The Cross where Our Saviour hangs in love for us, taking upon himself all our sins so that we may have hope. That sure and certain hope of salvation. That real hope of God's mercy and forgiveness if we truly walk in the ways of Jesus Christ.

Many of us at this moment in time are experiencing our own cross, our own Good Friday. The anxiety and worry over friends and family during the Covid-19 pandemic. The financial pressures and sleepless nights about the future, the job, the business. The frustrations of not being able to see parents, children and grandchildren. The sadness and grief over the death of loved ones. How many people on this Good Friday have already uttered those words of Jesus on the Cross:

'My God, My God why have you deserted me?' (Mk 15:34b)

I know a woman whose Good Friday started in January when she was told by the consultant at hospital that she would never walk again, she would never return to live in her own home again, she would no longer have the physical freedom to come and go as she used to.

I knew a man from a previous parish many years ago who had been living his own Good Friday for over fifteen years – he was an alcoholic. He would often sleep in a public car park and sometimes behind a supermarket. He had not seen his wife and three children and grandchildren for over a decade. This man had to beg to get enough money each day for his next drink.

I've spoken to an individual whose own Good Friday is not just pain and suffering for himself but for his whole family as he is addicted to the internet and the problems that it brings from online gambling to unsuitable viewing material. He has been sacked from work and his wife has left him.



'My God, My God why have you deserted me?' Jesus spoke these words to remind us that when we are in the most darkest moment of life, either through choice or circumstance, when we are drowning in pain and suffering and have absolutely nothing then we will find God. Abandoned, stripped naked, humiliated Jesus had nothing except God and this is why he calls out his name. ***'Eloi, Eloi lamma Sabachthani!'*** From the Cross Jesus is showing us the way to the Father by

completely surrendering to Him as there is no object, no person who can save us apart from God. When all seems lost it is only God who remains and who is steadfast. From the Cross Jesus is showing us that he understands our pain our suffering because he has been there too. From the Cross Jesus is showing us what forgiveness really is – mercy for both saint and sinner, a chance of hope and eternal life, for those who would take him into their lives.

My brothers and sisters I invite you to place the crucifix in your home today in a prominent position for all the household to see. I ask you to gaze on that corpus of Jesus and see the face of God's love and mercy and when you do then pray. Pray for all the world, pray for the needy and the hungry, pray for the penitent and the wanderer, pray for the believer and doubter, pray for those in healthcare and the emergency services, pray for those in government and authority, pray for those suffering and dying of the Covid-19 virus, pray for families who are separated and for those who are financially struggling, pray for the Church and our Holy Father Pope Francis. Whatever you do, whether in words or silence, pray.

Then I invite you to kiss the five wounds of Our Lord on the Cross and surrender yourself with all your faults, failings, worries and cares into his hands. For as he shows us on the Cross when we think we have nothing we always have him. When all security, routine and family have been taken away from us there is one person who is ever present – Our Lord Jesus Christ.

God Bless and keep praying

Fr. O'Brien

Maundy Thursday: The Mass of the Lord's Supper

9th April 2020

Albert Einstein, one of the world's great minds, didn't wake up one day and say to himself I think I'll be intelligent and create numerous mathematical theories and solutions today. No, Einstein had to learn, he had to be taught, he had to be formed. All of us hopefully want to know Jesus not just superficially but intimately and deeply, we want to be his disciples. Before we can even attempt to do this we have to know what it means then to be a follower and therefore we have to learn and be formed by Jesus our teacher. This Holy Thursday we enter the Lord's school of love (all be it spiritually this year!) and our classroom will be the upper room where Jesus will celebrate the Passover with the Twelve, and teach us his students the lessons of true discipleship.



Part One: *'I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you.'* (Jn 13:15)

The first lesson is washing the disciples feet. Our Lord, fully divine and fully human, humbly sank to his knees and washed the muck and the dirt and the filth from his follower's feet. To put it another way, God in flesh and blood, himself no less, washed the feet of a fishermen called Peter, he washed the feet of a tax collector called Matthew, he washed the feet of a traitor called Judas! He –the Word made Flesh – washed his disciples feet to teach us about real love. Love that

means humbling ourselves before others and serving them no matter what! Even if they are a friend or enemy, a brother/sister or a traitor, a believer or a doubter. To be a disciple and to know Jesus is to act in this way.

I find this hard. My ego and pride find this hard, yet if Our Lord gives us this example, then to be a good disciple means to embrace this way of love. Normally at the evening Mass I would remove my priestly vestment, the chasuble, and get on my hands and knees before twelve people sitting on the sanctuary and wash their feet in imitation of Jesus Christ the Servant-King. It is not some empty ritual but a prayer that draws us into the beauty of Jesus' unconditional love for us all and reminds us how we are to act in our relationships with others.



Part Two: *The Priesthood*

The second part of the lesson that Jesus gives us, still connected with the washing of feet, is his love through the Priesthood. St Peter, when he finally succumbs to letting the Lord wash his feet says: ***'...not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well!'*** (Jn 13:9) St Peter as usual has missed the point. The washing of the feet is not about being physically clean it is about being clean in our hearts, that intimate place where God dwells within us. Jesus washes and cleanses us through the gift of the Sacraments of Baptism and Confession. He has chosen certain men

to be his priests in order to administer these precious life giving graces. It is through Our Lord's priests that he cleans us his people in mercy; washes us in forgiveness and he purifies us in new life. The priesthood is that sacred vocation that allows Jesus' words and actions to become truly present for the salvation of those who desire God and want to journey towards Him. Priests come in many shapes and sizes! Varying personalities carrying both strengths and weakness', however, no saint, not even the most holiest and mystical saint, ever reached Heaven or truly knew Jesus Christ without encountering a priest and the Sacraments.



Part Three: *The Eucharist*

The final part of our master's lesson on discipleship is found in the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ. When a couple come before the altar to marry each other they promise to always love one another in the good times and the bad. They promise to be faithful to one another in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer. They promise to serve and support one another till death do they part. In the Eucharist, which Jesus instituted on this night in the upper room, he makes the same vow of love to us, he uses the same intimate language of marriage. He

becomes the bridegroom giving everything, even his own body, for us the church his bride.

‘Now as they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and when he had said the blessing he broke it and gave it to the disciples. ‘Take it and eat;’ he said ‘this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and when he had returned thanks he gave it to them. ‘Drink all of you from this,’ he said ‘for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which is to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins...’

(Matt 26: 26–28)

It is through the Eucharist that we are able to have the opportunity to be in such close loving union with Our Lord. He allows us to have Holy Communion to strengthen us on our journey through life, to remind us he is ever present and faithful, in good times and bad, in sickness and in health, for richer for poorer till death do we part. He gives us his very Body and Blood to show us that he loves us so much he keeps nothing from us – not even his actual real living presence in the Holy Eucharist.

Our teacher concludes his lesson on being a disciple of love with these words:

‘I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you.’

(Jn 13:15)

In the Washing of Feet, in the Sacraments, in the Priesthood and in the Eucharist Jesus reveals that he is Love itself and shows us the path we must walk if we are to call ourselves disciples. A real love that is humble. A real love that serves others no matter whether they are friend or foe. A love that is merciful and does not judge. A love that is always faithful. The lesson of Jesus our teacher is concluded. What have you learnt from it?

God Bless you and pray for me and all my brother priests on this feast of the Sacred Priesthood.

Keep praying for the containment and eradication of this awful virus so that we can all be reunited at the Altar of the Lord and receive his Sacraments again to help us in our lives of faith.

Fr. O’Brien

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

5th April 2020

Today, Palm Sunday, is the start of Holy week when Our Lord entered Jerusalem with the crowds enraptured by joy and hope.

'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heavens!' (Mt 21:9b)



As we know this joy will soon turn to anguish on Maundy Thursday as Jesus prays utterly alone in the garden of Gethsemane. His prayer will simply be, '*Not my will but Your will be done.*' The rapturous welcome of the crowds in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday will become the angry cries of the mob on Good Friday, screaming '*Crucify him! Crucify him!*' On Holy Saturday there will be silence. The silence of the grave, the silence of darkness and loneliness. It would appear that many of the trials and challenges Our Lord faced are now echoing in our own present situation.

We have the opportunity to still be able to accompany Our Lord on his journey from Jerusalem to Calvary this year, despite the effects and changes caused by the Coronavirus. We may not be able to publicly celebrate the liturgies of Holy Week in church from waving palms to kissing the Cross, from the Washing of Feet to the Easter fire, but we can still accompany him in his Passion.

Palm Sunday the crowds in Jerusalem welcomed Jesus into their city. Let us start this Holy Week by copying the crowd and inviting Jesus into our lives, into our hearts. I will be celebrating Mass privately in church at 11am. Why not join me spiritually for this hour and read the Passion Gospel for Palm Sunday which this year will be Matthew 26:14 – 27:66. Or if you can't read it at 11am try to find another part of the day to do so. Why not avail yourself of the opportunity of one of the many live streamed Masses taking place on the internet. Sadly I've been informed that at St. Mary's we don't have the broadband capacity to do this. As Jesus entered the Holy city to shouts of '*Hosanna!*' let us welcome the Lord into our hearts at the start of this Holy Week so that we can feel close to him.

On Maundy Thursday we will witness Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and showing the example of true charity. Why not this Thursday pray for all those who are serving others from healthcare workers to those involved in food supply and distribution. Let us pray for those unsung heroes like neighbours looking out for each other and families supporting one another. I'll be privately celebrating The Mass of the Lord's Supper at 8:30pm in church and again I invite you to set aside an hour of prayer and join me spiritually. You may wish to read the Gospel which will be John 13:1–15.

Good Friday. Our Lord dies on the Cross taking all the sins of the world upon himself. You will find on the parish website the Stations of the Cross from our own church. Why not take time on this day to pray this beautiful devotion and see how much Jesus loves us. I will be praying the Good Friday Liturgy at 3pm in church. I invite you again to set some time aside and pray with me for those who have died because of the Coronavirus and those who are struggling and suffering because of its effects. I'm sure there will be plenty of live streamed services taking place that you are able to watch.

On Holy Saturday why not pick up your Rosary. It is such a simple and effective prayer, especially when meditating on the Passion of Christ in the sorrowful mysteries. Our Lady always brings us so close to her Son when we turn to her in this beautiful devotion.

I will be placing a box near the Tabernacle during Holy Week for prayers, petitions and thanksgivings. If you would like prayers being placed at this time before the Blessed Sacrament in the Tabernacle then please do email me at sean.obrien@dioceseofsalford.org.uk and if you would like me to pray with you then do ring the presbytery. I'll set aside Mon – Wed this week from 9:30am – 11:30am to answer calls and pray with parishioners.

The Coronavirus seems to have changed so much of our daily lives and routines but what it can't put a stop to is our faith. Please don't let Holy Week pass you by this year but see it as a time of hope and a witness to God's merciful and saving love. A love that is surely needed now more than ever.

God Bless and keep praying
Fr. O'Brien

Fifth Week of Lent: Christian Fasting (I)

Thursday 2nd April 2020

Ash Wednesday seems a lifetime ago especially as we all continue to adjust to the present circumstances of lock-down in the fight against the Coronavirus. This new way of daily living is proving to have many blessings as well as many challenges. People are finding themselves confined in the same place with others for long periods of time with only short breaks for necessary shopping and brief spells of exercise. My brother told me on the phone how wonderful it was that he and his wife and their two boys have been able to spend quality time together over the last week. However, my 3 year old nephew is now starting to “climb the walls” and my bother thinks he’s getting “cabin fever”! Tension is building! This tension can sometimes spill over into words of frustration, impatience and anger. How many families have experienced this already? For those who are on their own, they too do not escape this challenge of hurtful words. The phone, emails and other social media allows angry words into their physically isolated spaces as well as the opportunity for them to direct negative words to others.



What to do? Well I think it is worth keeping in mind one of the tools the Lord spoke about in the Ash Wednesday Gospel.

‘When you fast do not put on a gloomy look as the hypocrites do: they pull long faces to let men know they are fasting...’ (Mt 6:16)

Fasting is not a popular subject especially in our Western consumer culture which talks about opulent comforts, excessive luxury, and the worship of self.

Advertisers tell us we need this or that product and if we don’t have them, then

our lives are not incomplete. Sadly, in the Western world you even hear many people say during Lent – ‘You don’t have to give up anything just do something extra instead!’ To fast is to give up something, to abstain, do without, sacrifice a little luxury and comfort. It is quite obvious when Our Lord speaks in the Gospel that he assumes people are already practising fasting: ‘*When you fast...*’ he says. He does not say, ‘*If you fast*’, ‘*Could you fast*’ or even ‘*Fast when it suits you*’ but simply ‘*When you fast*’. He takes it for granted that those who are believers automatically do this. In fasting we are reminding ourselves that our happiness does not depend on material objects but solely on God Himself. Comforts are nice and bring a little joy but it is only God who gives us eternal bliss. When we fast we humble ourselves before our Loving Creator and acknowledge that without Him we are simply dust.

So how does Jesus’ teaching about fasting help us in our relationships during the coronavirus lock-down? Well maybe we can do a fast of the tongue. In the Bible the letter of James reminds us that though the tongue be only a small part of the human body it can have a powerful effect.

‘So is the tongue only a tiny part of the body, but it can proudly claim that it does great things. Think how small a flame can set fire to a huge forest; the tongue is a flame like that...’ (Jm 3:5–6a)

In hurtful words from frustrated grumblings to impatient mumblings others can be wounded and feel even more isolated than they already are. Let us fast from using the tongue to hurt. We may be harassed, tired and worried but before we speak, before we let loose the tongue let us think of its consequences for those loved ones we live with and those friends and family at the other end of the phone and email.

I have found myself this week having to deal with some irrelevant bureaucracy. It would have been so easy to unleash my tongue and berate the person at the other end of the phone. If I had given into that temptation I’m sure for a few moments I would have felt better because it would have let me feel as though I was in control of something for the first time since the coronavirus pandemic and it would have released a lot of pent up frustration. However, I found myself biting my tongue instead and fasting from the barrage of caustic insults and negative words. As James writes in his letter ‘*the tongue is a flame...*’ and once control is lost of the flame it can burn down whole forests and moorlands causing devastation. It takes a long time for things to heal and mend from its destructive power. The tongue has the same power. It can be used for good and for bad. I recognise that if I am to call myself a disciple of Jesus Christ then I have to embrace his way, his

command and his cross of love. Fasting from the tongue is part of the road towards being in his loving presence forever.

Thank you to all those who have rang up and left messages asking if I am okay. To those who have left little presents at the door, you are all very kind and I'm doing well. It's like being a monk again! I have tried to ring up as many people as I have phone numbers for but as you can imagine that is a pretty big task. I'm not even halfway through the list yet so please don't feel left out if I've not rang – I'm getting there. Do feel free to ring the presbytery if you want a prayer or a chat. The mornings are the best.

As always keep praying
God Bless
Fr. O'Brien

Fifth Sunday of Lent: The Power of Prayer

29th March 2020

Many people have told me over the phone of all the various jobs and activities they have been doing while in isolation. Clearing out drawers and cupboards, decorating back rooms and bathrooms, pottering around the garden and getting round to those jobs they have never had the time to complete before. At the end of each chat I find myself saying 'God love you and keep praying.' Keep Praying. This isn't an insincere platitude, a hollow phrase but something I truly believe and know to be powerful. It is by praying we can make a difference and help others.

The news this week has shown us the huge numbers of people who are volunteering and working to combat the Coronovirus in our country. We are seeing such powerful public shows of support like 'the applause' for our NHS workers on Thursday and community groups looking out for those who are the most vulnerable in their streets, flats and local areas. Pictures of rainbows are being placed in windows to encourage and give hope. All these things are showing the outside world that love and charity among humankind is not dead.

We as brothers and sisters in Christ have a unique role to play – prayer. It is through prayer that we are able to support, encourage, aid and love those on the front line of this pandemic, those who are anxious and worried, those who are suffering and mourning as well as those who sadly have gone before us marked with the sign of faith.

The picture below (For those who cannot see it please do visit the parish website) depicts an important episode in the book of Exodus.



‘As long as Moses kept his arms raised, Israel had the advantage...’ (Ex 17:11a).

The people of Israel following Moses, after liberation from slavery in Egypt, engage in battle with the Amalekites. Moses stands at a distance and raises his hands in prayer and as soon as he does it has an impact, the Israelites gain the upper hand. Though he is not in the heat of battle his prayer aids the people of Israel and all goes well for them. However, ***‘...when he [Moses] let his arms fall, the advantage went to Amalek.’*** (Ex 17:11b)

All looks like doom and yet in this potential tragedy Moses is blessed! He is not on his own, he is part of a community, a family and because of this his prayer and their support leads the people of Israel to victory.

‘But Moses’ arms grew heavy, so they took a stone and put it under him and on this he sat, Aaron and Hur supporting his arms, one on one side, one on the other; and his arms remained firm till sunset. With the edge of the sword Joshua cut down Amalek and his people.’ (Ex 17:12–13)

This piece of scripture from the Old Testament reminds us about the power of prayer. No matter where we are standing at this time in our daily lives – the hospital, the supermarket, home or the garden – our prayer will help our brothers and sisters in the battle to contain this virus. No matter when we are tired, exhausted and our mind is distracted with worry there is always another believer praying for us and the world. We may be all in physical isolation but our prayers connect us with each other as we are all part of the Body of Christ.

Today (Sunday 29th March 2020) at 12noon our country will be re-dedicated as the Dowry of Mary. When it comes to prayer Our Blessed Mother is the model of prayer and intercession. It was St. John Vianney who once wrote that when we ask Our Lady to pray with us our prayers become scented with a beautiful perfume that is always pleasing to Jesus Christ our Lord. Do watch the Holy Mass live at 12noon being streamed from Walsingham if you can. The link is on our website.

I will be celebrating Mass at 11am today and though it will not be public do know that I always bring your intentions to the Altar. In the afternoon I will also be praying the Rosary and the Litany of Our Lady in our own parish Chapel of Our Lady of Oswaldtwistle. Again know that each day I ask her to pray for all parishioners of St. Mary’s and their families. For the rest of the week Mass will be said at noon Monday – Saturday.

God Bless and do keep praying
Fr. O’Brien

Pope at Urbi et orbi: Full text of his meditation

Pope Francis meditated on the calming of the storm from the Gospel of Mark during the prayer service over which he presided on the steps of St Peter's Basilica on Friday evening. Here is the full text.

“When evening had come” (*Mk* 4:35). The Gospel passage we have just heard begins like this. For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people's gestures, their glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost. Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat... are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying “We are perishing” (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.

It is easy to recognize ourselves in this story. What is harder to understand is Jesus' attitude. While his disciples are quite naturally alarmed and desperate, he stands in the stern, in the part of the boat that sinks first. And what does he do? In spite of the tempest, he sleeps on soundly, trusting in the Father; this is the only time in the Gospels we see Jesus sleeping. When he wakes up, after calming the wind and the waters, he turns to the disciples in a reproaching voice: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” (v. 40).

Let us try to understand. In what does the lack of the disciples' faith consist, as contrasted with Jesus' trust? They had not stopped believing in him; in fact, they called on him. But we see how they call on him: “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” (v. 38). *Do you not care*: they think that Jesus is not interested in them, does not care about them. One of the things that hurts us and our families most when we hear it said is: “Do you not care about me?” It is a phrase that wounds and unleashes storms in our hearts. It would have shaken Jesus too. Because he, more than anyone, cares about us. Indeed, once they have called on him, he saves his disciples from their discouragement.

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people's souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly "save" us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity.

In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters.

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Lord, your word this evening strikes us and regards us, all of us. In this world, that you love more than we do, we have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste. We did not stop at your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick. Now that we are in a stormy sea, we implore you: "Wake up, Lord!".

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Lord, you are calling to us, calling us to faith. Which is not so much believing that you exist, but coming to you and trusting in you. This Lent your call reverberates urgently: "Be converted!", "Return to me with all your heart" (*Joel 2:12*). You are calling on us to seize this time of trial as a *time of choosing*. It is not the time of your judgement, but of our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others. We can look to so many exemplary companions for the journey, who, even though fearful, have reacted by giving their lives.

This is the force of the Spirit poured out and fashioned in courageous and generous self-denial. It is the life in the Spirit that can redeem, value and demonstrate how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people – often forgotten people – who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show, but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, religious men and women and so very many others who have understood that no one reaches salvation by themselves. In the face of so much suffering, where the authentic development of our peoples is assessed, we experience the priestly prayer of Jesus: “That they may all be one” (Jn 17:21). How many people every day are exercising patience and offering hope, taking care to sow not panic but a shared responsibility. How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday gestures, how to face up to and navigate a crisis by adjusting their routines, lifting their gaze and fostering prayer. How many are praying, offering and interceding for the good of all. Prayer and quiet service: these are our victorious weapons.

“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” Faith begins when we realise we are in need of salvation. We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we flounder: we need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God’s strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms, because with God life never dies.

The Lord asks us and, in the midst of our tempest, invites us to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering. The Lord awakens so as to reawaken and revive our Easter faith. We have an anchor: by his cross we have been saved. We have a rudder: by his cross we have been redeemed. We have a hope: by his cross we have been healed and embraced so that nothing and no one can separate us from his redeeming love. In the midst of isolation when we are suffering from a lack of tenderness and chances to meet up, and we experience the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: he is risen and is living by our side.

The Lord asks us from his cross to rediscover the life that awaits us, to look towards those who look to us, to strengthen, recognize and foster the grace that lives within us. Let us not quench the wavering flame (cf. *Is* 42:3) that never falters, and let us allow hope to be rekindled.

Embracing his cross means finding the courage to embrace all the hardships of the present time, abandoning for a moment our eagerness for power and possessions in order to make room for the creativity that only the Spirit is capable of inspiring. It means finding the courage to create spaces where everyone can recognize that they are called, and to allow new forms of hospitality, fraternity and solidarity. By his cross we have been saved in order to embrace hope and let it strengthen and sustain all measures and all possible avenues for helping us protect ourselves and others. Embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope: that is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear and gives us hope.

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Dear brothers and sisters, from this place that tells of Peter's rock-solid faith, I would like this evening to entrust all of you to the Lord, through the intercession of Mary, Health of the People and Star of the stormy Sea. From this colonnade that embraces Rome and the whole world, may God's blessing come down upon you as a consoling embrace. Lord, may you bless the world, give health to our bodies and comfort our hearts. You ask us not to be afraid. Yet our faith is weak and we are fearful. But you, Lord, will not leave us at the mercy of the storm. Tell us again: "Do not be afraid" (*Mt* 28:5). And we, together with Peter, "cast all our anxieties onto you, for you care about us" (cf. *1 Pet* 5:7).

The Solemnity of the Annunciation

Wednesday 25th March 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today is 'The Annunciation' a truly great and beautiful solemnity which we keep each year in the Church to remind ourselves of that moment when Our Blessed Lady said 'Yes' to God. Her 'Yes' was not lukewarm or half hearted but a total complete giving and surrendering to God. At this moment in time the upheaval in daily life can be distracting and for some frustrating therefore our saying 'Yes' to God can be a grumble, a whisper, a second thought.

However, God the Holy Spirit always seems to inspire and reveal hope at the right moment. I came across this image of '*The Annunciation*' by Fra Angelico which is in the San Marco museum in Florence. (For those who cannot see it please do visit the parish website)



This Annunciation scene teaches us so much about prayer, hope and God's love in this time of self isolation and social distancing. We see Mary, on her own, humbly sat on a stool within a room surrounded by stone columns.

Yet within this enclosed space the Angel Gabriel, God's messenger appears. No matter where we are and what we are doing God the Father is always with us, no wall, no barrier no human isolation can block out His loving Presence.

Mary seems to be bowing her head towards Gabriel in a sign of respect and welcome. The Virgin is acknowledging God's very presence in her home. How many of us have paused to remind ourselves that God is dwelling within our own homes? How many of us have welcomed Him and acknowledged His presence? Do we have a wall with the crucifix on, a statue of the Sacred Heart or Our Lady, a shelf or other space with a candle lit? These Holy images and objects are not for us to show off how "Catholic" we are but to remind us in a concrete way that God is present in our midst. We acknowledge that fact by giving Him welcome within our home so that in turn it becomes a sacred space and a focal point for prayer.

Outside the room we see a garden and a wild forest behind the wooden fence. It is dark and empty. Within the room where Our Lady and the Angel stand it is full of warm light, the colours are rich and inviting. Our Lady is our second mum who will always reassure and brighten up our life because she is the one who is always pointing to her son – Jesus, Our Lord – who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Why not pick up our rosary beads, and in communion with our Blessed Mother, focus on the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Within these mysteries of the rosary we are able to know the Lord a little more by meditating and reflecting on key episodes in his life. True peace does not come from outside, it is not bought in a shop or found in external amusements. No, true peace is found within when we allow Jesus not only into our homes but also our hearts and give time to speak to him each day.

Finally we see that Our Lady is crossing her arms tenderly about herself. She has conceived by the Holy Spirit because of her welcoming 'Yes' to God, not only into her home but also into her very being. For nine months the Son will grow within her, for nine months she will feel his presence, for nine months she will wait patiently to gaze upon the face of God, a face that not even the great patriarchs and prophets of the past ever had the good fortune to see. At this moment in time people are unable to come to church and sit before the Tabernacle where the true Presence of Our Lord is found in the Eucharistic species, the Blessed Sacrament. However if we look to Mary she shows us that through desire, patient yearning and longing we too will eventually come to gaze upon the Son in his real presence within the Tabernacle and be united in worship at the Altar as a family.

O Holy Mary teach us to welcome your Son Jesus into our homes and our hearts. Help us to make time and space to pray each day. Intercede for us that we may have the grace of patience and when we do return back to church help us have greater awe and devotion for the Lord's true presence in the Tabernacle.

May God Bless you all on this solemnity of the Annunciation.

Keep praying. Though Mass is not public know that I will be celebrating it at 12noon in church today.

With my prayers and thoughts

Fr. O'Brien

(Parish Priest)