

PASSION (PALM) SUNDAY

One evening a London commuter was hurrying home. As he neared Westminster Cathedral, he was drawn to enter it. He could not explain why because he had long ago dismissed religion.

Having entered the building, he was startled by the cross hanging from the dome. He was taken aback at the sight of a man on a cross, tortured, abandoned, dead. He had seen terrible pictures of men, women and children slaughtered in Bosnia, they too abandoned. In other places, he had seen pictures of people starving, emaciated, flies crawling over their faces, eyes staring, no longer appealing for help but waiting – waiting for death.

The man sat and gazed at that cross for some time. Slowly its inner meaning revealed itself to him. He began to see, in the tortured and dying figure on the cross, a mother mourning her dead sons in Bosnia, a starving child in Africa, the grieving parents of loved ones killed in an accident, the suffering of the mentally or physically sick. All human pain seemed to be gathered up and, as it were, made his own by that man on the cross.

Then the visitor looked around him and saw men and women praying quietly. They seemed to possess a precious secret. They looked at ease with themselves and at home in this vast cathedral. Then he saw an elderly woman approach a crucifix that stood near a shrine. After kissing the wounds of Christ she moved away, comforted and consoled by such great love.

As he watched, his mind and heart seemed to be carried upwards into another sphere of reality. For the first time in his life he was at prayer. The cross was not so much speaking about death as celebrating love, life and hope. The cross of horror became the cross of hope, the tortured body became the body of new life, the gaping wounds became the source of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. When he finally left the cathedral and joined the evening traffic, he felt at peace with himself and the world.

Jesus' passion was no play-acting; it was real. And it was freely chosen. He suffered the pain of being let down by his friends. He suffered the pain of being betrayed by one of them – Judas. He suffered fear and anguish in the garden, and he had no one to support him during his agony.

He was subjected to a barrage of false accusations. He endured insults, blows, taunts, spits; then the lash of the whip and the piercing of the thorns and the nails. He suffered the shame of being condemned to death like a common criminal. As he died he had to endure more taunts, insults and mockery. Who could plumb the depths of what he suffered ?

By uniting our suffering to the sufferings of Jesus, we can find peace. There is no loneliness, hunger, oppression, exploitation, torture, imprisonment, violence, or threats that have not been suffered by Jesus. There can be no human beings who are completely alone in their sufferings, since God, in and through Jesus, has become Emmanuel, God with us.

The passion of Jesus gives courage, strength and hope to all who suffer. It means we are not alone.