

DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY 2020.

In the 17th Century, Pope Urban VIII had four magnificent niches created in the pillars that support the great dome of St Peter's Basilica in Rome. The niches are covered with canopies and open out onto a balcony known as the Balcony of the Relics. The relics are all important items related to the passion of Christ, and are each connected to a statue within each niche. The statues are of Veronica and the relic of her face cloth, St Andrew whose head was eventually brought to Rome after he was strung up on a decussate cross, that is, a cross in the shape of an X, St Helen the mother of Constantine who found the true cross of which some of the fragments are in the niche and finally probably the finest statue of them all by that great sculptor and artist Bernini, the figure of Longinus.

Who was Longinus? He is not named in the canonical Gospels, you will have to go to the Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus for that, but we know him as the centurion who on finding Jesus already dead, thrust his lance into his side and out gushed blood and water. In the niche at St Peter's it is said that part of his spear is retained. But there is a bigger story to this event. It is said that when Longinus came to that central cross on which hung the saviour of the world and plunged in the spear, a few drops of Christ's life giving blood ran down the spear, touched the centurion's hand and he was immediately healed of a lifelong affliction. In His death Christ had brought new life to this man, his blood had given the gift of divine mercy, and in the words of Isaiah "by his wounds we are healed."

In the preamble to this week's lectionary readings, Pope Francis writes, "At the heart of this Sunday are the glorious wounds of the Risen Christ. The wounds of Jesus are scandal, a stumbling block for faith yet they are also the test of faith. That is why on the body of the risen Jesus the wounds never pass away; they remain; for those wounds are the enduring sign of God's love for us, for believing that God is love, mercy and faithfulness."

Think of the wounds of the risen Christ as tokens of his victory over all that brings to earthly life pain and suffering, the constant threat of death that forever stalks our journey. These wounds are reminders of how another great king in the lineage of Jesus brought about the end of that which threatened

life. Think of the young shepherd boy David, who when encountering Goliath with all his might and fury, picked up five stones from the river bed and used them to bring an end to the Philistines tyranny. Jesus did not use five stones, but his five wounds to bring about the tyranny of death. Those five awful bloodied fountains bring life to all and rescues us from an eternity in the grave.

We must never try to bypass or overlook this aspect of our risen Lord, there is very good reasons why our Lord brought with him through death those glorious marks of his passion. I think of the words of the Auschwitz survivor Dr Victor Frankl. When he was asked how he survived he replied that it wasn't the suffering that killed, it was suffering without meaning. Our Lords risen body replete with his wounds gave meaning to those agonising hours of torture and pain. They show that all suffering has meaning when placed in the open wounds of Jesus, otherwise if Jesus had risen with a perfect unblemished body then we would need to wonder whether suffering and pain in this life is utterly meaningless.

His wounds transformed is a sign that we do not enthrone our own suffering, but carry them on through death to be transformed in the Fathers embrace of loving mercy. For all people who this day lie on their beds of pain, whether physical, mental or spiritual, the hour will come when we will be taken down from that particular cross, our Lord will look upon our wounds and see in them the image of his wounds and will give his mercy and peace for all eternity.

Have you ever wondered why St Thomas would not believe that our Lord had risen from the grave until he could see and actually touch his wounds? You would think that it would have been more obvious to have just wanted to see Jesus; but no, that wouldn't have been enough for Thomas. The only evidence that would have been found worthy in the court of his acceptance to believe was the wounds of Christ. It was the wounds that gave Jesus his authenticity to the whole of his life. As he lived, showing mercy, so he died with words of mercy on his lips, so he arose taking into heaven that same mercy for all those whose pain would be transformed. Thomas knew what he was doing when he insisted on seeing the wounds of Jesus, for wounds were consistent with the whole of Jesus' life and could not be left that side of life if life was to have any meaning at all.

The risen Jesus gave us an enduring resource when he presented his wounds to Thomas, and it is one that declares to us all that he works with our brokenness, gives our pain meaning and shows all his children mercy. Healing our wounds and forgiving our sins. By his wounds we are healed.

Amen