

HOMILY FOR PALM SUNDAY

It was probably one of the worst times to sacrifice a son. The Jews were cruel enough with their practice of stoning people to death. Yet, it was the Romans who had brought crucifixion as the cruellest way to die. It was a slow, agonising death of suffocation as the breathing muscles weakened and gave in. It might take days which was why Pilate was astonished that Jesus had died as quickly as he had.

Of course, it was also the Romans who tied pieces of bone, metal or rock into the tails of their whips to strip the flesh off a person's body. It was the Romans who made the crown of thorns on this occasion.

It was the worst time to be sacrificed but then, this was the way Jesus made himself humbler than all men. This day represents, as St. Paul also says in the second reading, that Jesus 'emptied himself'.

We began by hearing of the triumphant entry where he was welcomed as a king - a worthy and truthful place for someone equal to God but after this, we follow his descent into his becoming a slave.

Mark's gospel depicts a man who continues to descend but, not without preparing his disciples for his separation from them. Hence the Lord's Supper is put in place through which he will continue to present himself to all his followers when his words are said over bread and wine.

We see him amongst his closest friends where there is criticism, betrayal, desertion and denial in his most troubled time. We see him standing alone before his accusers and mockers, determined that they carry out their part as he carries out his.

He is placed amongst the criminals. We see him offered a drink of wine mixed with myrrh, which would have dulled his pain but, he refuses it, going lower than others and feeling our pain in its fullness.

We see him come to his loneliest moment when he feels deserted even by God, showing the lowest of human experience.

The vinegar offered was a weak solution which was drunk in place of water. This was the last recognition of his human dignity before he breathed his last.

Then he dies, the loneliest man of all and, in his loneliness, he is entombed.

This is the man with the disciple's tongue. The servant of Isaiah who made no resistance.

He set his face like flint and determined to die for us. This is the same man who has set his face like flint upon each of us and who longs for us to see his love, expressed in his total self-giving.

May we look back at him in this coming week with gratitude and humble love.