



Homily for the Easter Vigil

Cardiff Cathedral

Saturday 3rd April 2021

Archbishop George Stack

I was ordained a priest on 21st May 1972. Something else happened on that day which isn't such a happy memory. A Hungarian man named Laslo Toch went into St. Peter's in Rome and smashed the statue of the Pieta with twelve hammer blows to the head, the face the arm, the hand. All broken into thousands of pieces. The statue was created by Michelangelo in 1499 and depicts the moment when the body of Jesus is taken down from the cross and laid in the arms of his mother Mary.

People were appalled at this desecration. They wondered how such a thing could have happened. As always, they wondered what possessed the schizophrenic Toch to undertake such vandalism.

“The Testament of Mary”, is a novel by the Irish writer Colm Toibin. In it, he portrays the mother of Jesus wondering at the strange life Jesus has led in the three years of his public ministry. She wonders at the odd group of followers whom he called disciples. She worries, as any mother would, about the reactions to him when he confronts injustice and hypocrisy. The tragedy of his undeserved suffering and innocent death must surely have deepened her questions. The gospels also tell us of how Mary wondered often during her life. She wondered at the angel's message at the annunciation. *“How can this be since I am a virgin”*. She

wondered at the Presentation of the child Jesus in the Temple when Simeon told her *“A sword of sorrow will pierce your own soul too”*. She must surely have wondered in every sense of that word, as she stood at the foot of the cross *“Is this what God asked of me those years ago? Is this the cost of my faithfulness? Where did I go wrong”*.

On this Easter day we read that two different Mary’s went to the tomb early that first Easter morning. We are told they, too, worried about who would roll away the stone. They wondered and worried in a most profound way when, finding the tomb open, they were spoken to by an angel of the Lord. Another annunciation!

But Mary the mother of Jesus wasn’t with the two Mary’s. Had she already encountered the risen Christ? She had stood at the foot of the cross in sorrow and faithfulness. Did she need to be at the tomb to know that he had risen as he said he would?

That image of the Pieta must surely speak to all mothers, and fathers and sons and daughters, in fact speak to all of us who try to comprehend the tragedy that has struck the world in this pandemic. All of us wondering as we adjust to a new way of living and worrying about whether jobs and businesses will survive. Worried whether schools are places

where our children will thrive or will they be causes of spreading the virus. To add grief to grief, still trying to comfort the bereaved who have not been able to make the final farewell to loved ones in the customary way at a funeral which is so much part of the journey from this life to the next.

The spoken and unspoken question for all of us is surely: “When will this all be over?” The disciples must have thought the same. But of course, it will never be over. Everything has changed. We will never be able to go back to the past as if this had never happened, not least with the knowledge of human vulnerability and the preciousness of life – and love.

Joseph of Arimathea is a shadowy figure in the gospels. He came to Jesus by night because he was afraid – like so many of us. He loaned his tomb for the burial of Jesus. He isn’t mentioned when the disciples discover that the tomb of Jesus was empty. Is it too much to say he might have thought he would be able to build a shrine to this remarkable man called Jesus? Joseph of Arimathea is like so many of us. Trying to cling on to the past as much as we can. Imagine him saying:

“He’s safe” says Joseph, “safe in this cool place,
And no one now can take my Lord away:
In years to come I’ll still see his dear face,
As clearly as I saw it yesterday”

“He’s gone” cries Joseph later, in despair.
But Mary says “He’s left this word for you:
He cannot rest content to be your past.
So he has risen, to be your future too”.
