

GOOD FRIDAY REFELCTION (A)

Jesus began his suffering on the Mount of Olives. On this mountain to this day are eight ancient olive trees and it may very well be among these same trees that Jesus went through his agony in the garden of Gethsemane. Ancient people believed that olive trees lived forever. Gethsemane means 'olive press'. We find Jesus praying on this occasion as he did at every other important cross road in his life, at his baptism, when starting his ministry, when choosing the 12, at his transfiguration. The three apostles who shared his glory at the Transfiguration would now share his hour of agony. Jesus endured four forms of suffering:

His first was mental agony.

Just thinking about the physical suffering ahead was terrifying. Crucifixion has been called the cruellest suffering every devised. Jesus knew and prophesied that he was going to suffer grievously and be handed over to the authorities to die a very painful death. But this warning passed over the apostles heads. Peter even harassed Jesus for saying such outlandish things. The same apostle along with James and John fell asleep in the garden and most of the rest of them fled the scene. No wonder the Jesus asked the Father to take this cup away from him.

Then there is the emotional suffering

It began when Judas betrayed him. It intensified when the rest fled leaving him alone to the face the mob. Peter's denial must have also hurt Jesus deeply. Jesus was betrayed deserted and disowned and then locked for half the night in a dark dungeon - all alone. The words of Psalm 41 are fulfilled – "even my best friend, the one who shared my food has turned against me" Another blow to Jesus in his fragile emotional state was when Pilate washed his hands of the situation even though he was aware Jesus was innocent. "The crowd jeered at him and mockingly provoked him to come down from the cross if he was the Christ". Even one of those crucified with him taunted him.

Then there is the physical suffering.

In the scourging the Roman used whips which dug deeply into the victim's flesh. Many victims collapsed and died before the ordeal was over. As he was being crowned with sharp thorns, the soldiers also mocked him and spat on him and ridiculed him for claiming to be King of the Jews while at the same time hitting him hard on the head. Like all criminals he was forced to carry his own cross to Calvary. So painful was the journey that Simon of Cyrene was dragged from the crowd to help him. Jesus drank the figurative cup of suffering to the dregs when the soldiers offered him a drugged drink to deaden the pain which he refused. Even though the pain of crucifixion is excruciating, criminals could be hanging on a cross for days before they died. Many often died of hunger and thirst. Many became stark raving mad. This is the type of suffering which Jesus endured.

What about the spiritual suffering?

Did Jesus even feel abandoned by his Father? We know the words "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" are taken from psalm 22 and if you pray it to the end you will see how low spiritually Jesus must have felt. But then Jesus prays another psalm despite all the suffering and abandons himself completely into his Father's hands when he says "Father into your hands I commend my spirit". He then gives up His spirit". We sum up this reflection with a quote from St Andrew of Crete:

"If there had been no Cross the record of our sins would not have been cancelled, we would not have gained freedom, we would not have enjoyed the tree of life and paradise would not have been opened. If there had been no Cross, death would not have been trodden underfoot; On the Cross Christ won his victory, wounding the devil and conquering death forever". "The tree of man's defeat becomes his tree of victory"