

18 April 2014 (Good Friday)

'If you cannot feel their pain, you cannot be their priest'. Many years ago on retreat, I was reading a collection of stories of priests serving in America. It detailed the lives of priests from around America, from many different backgrounds, different ages serving in an extraordinary variety of ministries – parishes, schools, seminaries and universities, defence force chaplains, missionaries, prisons and social welfare, people on the margins. I was particularly struck by the story of a newly ordained priest, Fr Michael, who came from a very strong Catholic family; he always wanted to be a priest, never really doubted his calling, had a dream run through the seminary and was now serving in his first parish. This young priest was young, popular and very idealistic; the youth group doubled under his leadership, dozens of young couples wanted him to marry them and he was used very often to give vocation talks in schools. But this young priest began to describe how his perfect, happy and care-free life began to unravel. He started to feel overwhelmed when in his daily ministry he began to encounter situations of great sadness and despair – marriage breakdown, mental illness, tragic death, drug and alcohol abuse, youth suicide, people who abandoned the Church and those who severely criticised the Church that this young priest loved. His sense of being overwhelmed started to contribute to high levels of stress, he questioned his vocation and even started to question his faith – how could a loving God allow so much pain, suffering and despair to touch people's lives? Deeply troubled, Fr Michael went to visit his old parish priest who was now in a retirement home, the one who first inspired him to be a priest. As Fr Michael painted a fairly gloomy picture of how his life had ended up so soon after ordination, the old and wise parish priest gently touched his arm and said, 'Michael, if you cannot feel their pain, you cannot be their priest'.

The liturgy of Good Friday gives us this wonderful yet profound sense that Jesus feels our pain, that in dying on the cross, the Son of God has completely embraced the human condition of suffering, despair, abandonment, betrayal and fear. That total desperation is heard in the cry of Jesus on the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' Jesus has given himself totally in love, he has emptied himself to the point of death, embracing every part of the human condition that we

have known at various moments of our lives – suffering, despair, hopelessness, darkness, fear, anxiety, betrayal, abandonment and doubt – Jesus has embraced this in order to set us free. He has embraced our pain and known our weakness; that's why he can set us free, that's why Good Friday is the story of sorrow, redemption and transformation. We venerate the cross of Christ because Jesus has known this reality in his life and therefore he stands with us in our own. That's why he can be our priest as the author of the letter to the Hebrews makes clear.

On this day, Christians touch the wood of the cross because it is transformed and becomes the tree of life for us. It is a sign of great hope and carries us in the moments of darkness. The pain we know in our lives is real, the death of Jesus gruesome and confronting. But notice how the Gospel of John invites us to touch the mystery of death and behold the sign of hope. Only John's Gospel has this scene where Jesus, clearly and already dead, has his side pierced with the lance and there comes forth blood and water. The wounded side becomes a fountain of life; Jesus continues to empty himself in love for us and for the world. Jesus has felt our pain; therefore, he is our priest.