

Today we are not allowed to celebrate Mass. Instead, we have this Solemn Liturgy, which has a title in the Missal. It is called “The Celebration of the Lord’s Passion.” Today, we don’t say “I’m going to Mass”; but we should say “I am going to the Celebration of the Lord’s Passion”. It might sound odd, if you said that to one of your friends, or someone you met on the way here. You may even be asked to explain what it meant.

The Passion, for a start; what is that? (your friend might ask you) – most people would associate that word with a feeling or an emotion; but in today’s context it doesn’t mean that at all – it means pain and suffering. You might also get asked “Who is this Lord who suffers? And why on earth are you celebrating his suffering? How can suffering possibly be something to celebrate? It is certainly a difficult thing to grasp, especially in a world where people seek pleasure, and want to avoid pain and suffering if at all possible.

So how would we answer that? Why are you going to celebrate someone suffering? It is important that we

think about this, because the answer is at the heart of our Catholic faith.

Because Jesus suffered for us, he died for us; because of his suffering we are redeemed, and we can receive the forgiveness of our sins, and have eternal life; but he also entered fully into our own human suffering – whatever pain and agony human beings have ever had to endure, Christ has endured it too.

We have heard the words in the first reading from Isaiah; “ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried, on him lies a punishment that brings us peace, and by his wounds we are healed.”

The suffering and death of Jesus is God’s own entry into all that we suffer, including death itself. Jesus not only knows and understands, he is with us in our suffering and death. His passion, death and resurrection transforms ours.

Today we celebrate how his suffering was that of a “servant,” for it was through what he endured that we are set free from our slavery to sin, and from that final enemy, death. “By his wounds we are healed.”

That beautiful and truly prophetic passage from Isaiah, written hundreds of years before Christ, yet still points us to Christ, who for us is the fulfilment of Isaiah's suffering servant.

As today we think about and ponder deeply on Jesus' suffering, on those "glorious" wounds, as we "behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the Saviour of the world," the Lord offers two powerful graces. We can venerate, and thereby embrace, the whole mystery of love that that cross represents today, and so receive two gifts, two very special graces of God.

The first gift is personal – it is for me. It's about my sins - my personal independence, my wanting my own way, my rebellion, my selfish choices, my failures to choose what is right and loving. The cross deals with these – it shows me the true way, the way of self-giving love. That is the first gift we receive today.

The second gift is universal – it is not just for me, it is for everyone, all who have ever lived and ever will live. It is given to us, but it is not just for us, it is for everyone, without exception.

Today, we can stand at the foot of the cross and realise that we have all been offered the same unconditional, love. We are all loved and forgiven, God does not compare us, we are all equally loved and accepted. We only have to accept this love and we will know eternal peace and salvation.

The Solemn Intercessions which are chanted today are always the same, they don't change, and they include everyone, people of every nation, language and faith, those with no faith – they are all included, they are all brought to the cross. No-one is excluded, there is not one person who is not prayed for today.

So as we come to the Cross today, in our hearts let us also take with us all those who may not be able to get there on their own. Those who would ask us "How can you celebrate suffering?" The many who do not spare even a thought for God today, who do not even know what this day is about; those who have no idea of Who it is that is hanging upon the Cross, nor why He is there. The world today has many such souls. We will know many such people. They are not bad people. Maybe their indifference to Jesus is simply because nobody has ever taken the trouble or had the

opportunity to tell them about Him. Today, we ask the Crucified Lord, through the merits of his Passion, to pour out His mercy upon them, and draw them to Himself, in the ways and at the time that He knows to be for the best. But we, each one with of us, needs to play our part by trying, where we get the chance, to engage people in conversations about faith, those we know, those that we meet, like my imaginary conversation about celebrating the Passion. Such conversations can make people think, and point them to Jesus, and the truth about the salvation he won for us today, Good Friday.

We pray and we hope that God, in his boundless grace and mercy will grant them, and us, salvation, through the redeeming power of his cross.