

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the Holy Spirit reminds us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, His ways not our ways. In fact, the heavens are as high above earth as His ways are above our ways, His thoughts above our thoughts. This truism is amply illustrated by and manifested in the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Only Son of God, Jesus Christ. After humanity had fallen flat on its face in the mud after committing the first sin, the Original Sin, how did God react to these disobedient, ungrateful, weak creatures who had deliberately and irrationally sought to become equal to Him and independent from Him? Well, the Three Persons of the Trinity, who have no need of anything or anyone outside of themselves, continued to love and keep in existence someone whom They had loved into being but who had the temerity to "throw" that love back into their faces. According to some human thinking and ways, as recorded in history, God would have had every right to abandon or even annihilate our first parents. However, thank God, His thoughts are not our thoughts, His ways not ours, for His thoughts and ways are always those of mercy and love. And in the fullness of time, the All Powerful, All Wise, Omnipresent God, who is love and mercy, intervened and helped humanity to stand erect once more, but this time with an even greater beauty and dignity than it had before sinning.

Almighty God set about achieving this by lowering Himself, coming down to our level, in order to raise us up to His level. Conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary, the Son of God became man, He embraced what He had made, entered fully into sinful humanity, but not into sin. Completely emptying Himself of all power, honour, wealth and glory, He chose to be born in the poverty of Bethlehem's stable, allowed Himself to be threatened by the murderous intentions of Herod, was carried as a refugee into exile in Egypt, returned anonymously to Nazareth and for thirty years chose to lead an inconspicuous life as a village carpenter. At about the age of thirty Jesus Christ left the security and love of His family home to embark on a public mission of preaching and miracles. This drew some followers but also resentment, jealousy and a growing irrational, murderous, hatred from the same people He had grown up with and had probably worked for, and a detestation from most of the religious leaders of the day, again members of His own race. From heaven, Almighty God could have simply said to all of us, "I forgive your sins, let us begin again," even His will without words would have been sufficient. He did not have to get involved in our puny, messy, limited state, experiencing cold-hearted, selfish, grasping, ignorant humanity. But what does He do? He sends down His own beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to us, knowing full well how shamefully we would treat Him.

That God should deliberately choose this humble way of dependence, poverty, hard work, suffering and finally death on a Cross to win forgiveness of our sins, if we want it, reconciliation with our Heavenly Father, if we want it, entry into heaven, if we want it, ought to convince us that there is merit in and a positiveness to such a way of life. But in all honesty, which one of us, if we were given the choice, would deliberately choose such a way? The way of the world, weakened by the legacy of Original Sin, inclines towards pursuing wealth, pleasure, power and honour and it has the potential to acquire such things at any cost. Our natural inclinations are to avoid suffering, shame, poverty, failure. But His thoughts are not our thoughts, His ways are not our ways. In His terrible Passion, Jesus Christ deliberately, willingly, lovingly, took the ugly reality of the sins of this fallen world on His back, carried all of them to Calvary and in His body nailed them to a Cross. With the infinite weight of His love, as He surrendered His body to death, Our Lord crushed once and for all the head of Satan, the one whose fate had been promised from the moment He introduced the disfigurement of sin into the beauty of God's creation. On the Cross, Jesus Christ, in His unconditional and wholehearted love for His Father and us, completely emptied Himself of His rightful status as the Only Son of God and taking on the condition of a slave, humbly carried all that afflicts humanity into the tomb to be buried with Him. But we know that His death, which defeated sin, did not defeat Jesus. Three days after dying on the Cross, Christ walked away from the tomb, body and soul, and like the grave clothes which He left behind, so Our Lord left behind death forever, not just for Himself but for us too. Our last enemy was finally, eternally defeated by His Resurrection.

If we profess to be true followers of Jesus Christ, we shall be with Him wherever He is. In this life, Our Lord, as well as receiving the adulation of the crowds, the gratitude of forgiven sinners, the thanks of the sick men, women and children whom He had healed, and experiencing

the glory of the Transfiguration, also endured terrible suffering and an agonising death, before He enjoyed the Resurrection and the lasting joy and peace of heaven. Christ has promised us that we, too, will most certainly share in His Resurrection and the joys of heaven, but not before we also experience a tiny fraction of His suffering and the death of our body. Returning from one of their missionary journeys via Lystra and Iconium to Antioch, Saint Paul and Saint Barnabas put fresh heart into the disciples, encouraging them to persevere in the faith, 'We all have to experience many hardships' they said 'before we enter the kingdom of God,' (Cf. Acts of the Apostles), somewhat of an understatement considering that Paul had just been stoned and left for dead! Christ Himself told His Disciples that He was sending them out to bear witness to Him, not as people who could impress and win over others by their physical strength or their intellectual prowess, no, Jesus said He was sending them out like lambs amongst wolves, to be treated by some as He, the Lamb of God, would be treated. Through our Baptism, every one of us has been called to bear witness to Jesus Christ in our daily lives. By what we say or do not say, by what we do or do not do, by our reaction to the various situations in life, others should clearly see the words, actions and responses of Our Blessed Lord. Through us they should be led to Him and then fall in love with Jesus. In fulfilling this duty and responsibility of bearing witness to our Saviour, we ought to remind ourselves that to be a witness to *The Way, The Truth and The Life* of Jesus Christ, who is all those things, is to be a martyr, because that is what the word "martyr" means, a witness. And, of course, being a true martyr, like Christ, the first of all Martyrs, who bore witness to the Father's love for Him and us, does not bring about death or injury to others.

Our Lord told His disciples that if they wished to follow Him in this life and into heaven, then every day they would need to shoulder the cross, His Cross, which must entail a complete self-emptying in order to love God and our neighbour perfectly. Only then can we be a true witness to Jesus. And once again we need to remind ourselves that the Cross which Christ referred to was not just a figurative way of speaking, not even the trials and tribulations of this life, difficult though they are at times. His Cross was real wood, real iron nails and real sharp thorns, Christ's Cross was flesh pierced, flayed, spat on and punched, His Cross meant blood, shed. The Cross of Christ is not a natural choice for sinful humanity, you and me, but His thoughts are not our thoughts, His ways not ours. Very early in the life of the Church, from the second or third century, when Christ's followers were literally shedding their blood for Him, that true but challenging phrase was penned, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church". So, if nothing else, the history of the Church for the past two thousand years shows us that to follow Christ is not going to be easy for us sinners, prone, as we are, to take the easy way out, and it will never get any easier. Recent statistics show that there were more men, women and children killed as Christian martyrs in the twentieth century than in all the other preceding centuries combined! But before we are tempted to be fearful or anxious by what ensues when we follow Jesus, Our Lord promised that He, the Good Shepherd, will never desert His flock, that He will always be with us. "In the world you will have trouble," He said, "but be brave; I have conquered the world."

To be effective witnesses, "martyrs", for Jesus Christ, we must return again and again to the martyrdom of Our Lord, God's definitive act of love made on the Cross, on Calvary. We need to be continually reminded of this act, ever thankful to Him, always open to receiving His love, His faith, His courage, in fact we need to participate in this very same act. This "martyrdom" is made present to all peoples, in all places, in all times, in the Mass, the source and summit of the Christian Faith. But if the *RESTRUCTURING*, as envisaged in The Vision Document, has, through practical necessity, to be implemented, what then will be our reaction to the likely inconvenience of longer distances to travel to Mass and what will be our response when we have to adjust our Saturday evenings or Sunday mornings because Mass times are different from what they are now? Well, our reaction will depend wholly on our understanding of what the Mass is and on how seriously we have responded to the urgent call of The Vision Document to *RENEW* our Catholic Faith, to grow deeper in our love for God. For at the heart of this Faith lies the intimate, passionate, love which Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has for each of us, made manifest time and time again in every Mass. A love which is such, that He longs for our response by entering freely and fully into a loving, personal relationship with Him, giving Him our hearts. Every Mass offers us that opportunity, and helps us to share that same love with others, to love them as He

loves them. It is only true love, His love within us, which will enable us to make the biggest sacrifices necessary in following Our Lord through this “vale of tears” to our true home in heaven. The Mass is THE Sacrifice, the merits of which help us to offer the sacrifice of our whole life in our love for Almighty God and for the sake our neighbour.

We may be tempted to ask, why can't our lives be trouble free, why are we facing different and difficult times in the practice of our Catholic Faith, why can't things be as they have always been? But this, sadly, is not the reality of this world burdened and weakened by sin, and our situation is compounded through being constantly attacked by forces far stronger than we alone can resist. Saint Paul reminds us, “*For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the Sovereignities and the Powers who originate the darkness in this world, the spiritual army of evil in the heavens.*” Through the death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ our arch enemy has been finally defeated, the war has been won, but in his death throes, the devil continues to skirmish against us and is still capable of delivering fatal blows to those who are ignorant of Christ or who stand at a distance from Him. But why should I be put to such inconvenience; why should I have to change the habits, maybe of a life time, when changes come about in the Diocese and my parish? After, perhaps, many, many years of practising my Catholic Faith, why should I now bother to continue with so many changes happening in the Church and living in a society which has either pushed God out to the peripheries of life or deleted Him completely? These are some of the attractive temptations which our enemy will offer to us. The blooded witnesses/martyrs down through the centuries of the Church are great and powerful allies when such temptations come our way. We might compare our possible future inconveniences with what men, women and children have suffered in the past and still do today for their Catholic Faith, violence or the threat of violence, being fined, imprisoned, exiled, tortured and even killed.

In one sense, God's ways and thoughts are not our ways and thoughts because He is God and we are not! But in another sense, with the exception of sin, God's ways and thoughts have now become our ways and thoughts, through and in Jesus Christ, truly God, now become truly man. Yes, He has experienced inconvenience, the imperfections of this fallen world and He has experienced violence, torture and death and still does in those who endure such sufferings today, but His ways and thoughts are those of the perfect man, the perfect human being. His ways are to do always the will of His Father in heaven, His thoughts are always thoughts of perfect love for His Father in heaven and for His neighbour on earth. His ways and thoughts should and can be ours also. The future in our Diocese, as in every other Diocese in the Country, is likely to be a testing time for all of us, priests and laity alike. Now is the time for us to prepare for this test by a deep and committed *RENEWAL* of our love for God, which alone will help us make the sacrifices involved in being effective witnesses/martyrs. In this respect, history is also an invaluable teacher whose lessons should help us today and tomorrow and remind us of the urgent necessity to *RENEW*.

Who, in this Country, on Friday, 2nd November, 1534, would have thought that by the end of the next day it would be an act of treason, an Act passed through Parliament, to deny that the King was the supreme head of the Church instead of the Pope? Who would have thought that within eight months, holy Carthusian monks would be hung, drawn and quartered in Tyburn, that a Bishop/Cardinal and an ex-chancellor of England would have their heads chopped off in the Tower of London because they would not accept the King's false and self-appointed title, a Catholic King who thirteen years previously had been given the highly honourable title “Defender of the Faith” by Pope Leo X? Who would have thought that in those immediate years of the Reformation, Catholics would arrest, torture and execute fellow Catholics, that Catholic parishioners and priests would betray fellow Catholic parishioners and priests? Who would have believed that within a few short years, monasteries and convents would be destroyed, that the vast majority of Bishops and priests would have abandoned their Catholic Faith and that the Catholic Church, as such, would cease to exist in this Country? We might ask, how strong was the Faith and how deep was the love that the Catholics of this Country then had for God, that such a collapse of the Church should come about so quickly? But perhaps an even more challenging question to dare to ask is, how strong is the Faith and how deep is the love of Catholics for The Almighty in

this Country today? Please God, with the prayers of Mary and all the witnesses/martyrs in heaven,
it will go from strength to strength.

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