

Our Lady of Sorrows

In today's First Reading, Paul brings up again the themes of interdependence and mutuality as he likens us to the different parts of the body, with each having a particular function, but none able to exist independently of the others - truly a case of the whole being more than the sum of its parts. This view is completely at variance with the cult of the heroic individual, be it a person or a nation, braving the assaults of its enemies, which is still a very powerful image in English political culture. If a body - of whatever kind - is going to survive, it is by the power and energy of love, not by 'taking up arms against a sea of troubles' (Shakespeare).

How does this tie in with Our lady of Sorrows, a devotion which flourished in the Middle Ages, and gave rise to that marvellous piece *Stabat mater*, which has been an inspiration to composers throughout the centuries?

When Mary and Joseph bring the Holy Child to Simeon, Simeon utters a chilling prophecy: "this child is destined for the fall and for the rising of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is rejected" - and then to Mary directly "and a sword will pierce your own soul too". (Luke 2:34-35) This brings up the whole question of suffering, which is an inevitable part of life and a perennial question for all theistic religions. Suffering is a part of life. If, going back to Paul's image of the body, part of the body is sick, then the whole body mobilises its resources to deal with the injury or infection. In other words, the whole organism acts in solidarity, and the healthier and fitter the body is as a whole, the better its chances of warding off illness - and in our lives we are called to look out for the health of the various communities to which we belong.

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