

“Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.”

Is 53:4

On the day of his ordination a priest lies prostrate before the altar of God and begs God to have mercy on him, and asks all the saints of God to pray for him, as he is sacramentally conformed to the likeness of Christ. Each year, at the start of the Good Friday Liturgy of the Passion, the priest lies, once more, flat on the floor. This time, he does something different. As the father of his parish, he lies prostrate and does what Christ did on the Cross: he offers up to God ‘prayers and supplications’ (Heb 5:7) on behalf of the people whom God has placed in his care. You may be surprised that just as all the human beings throughout time appeared before the mind of our Redeemer in those few hours on the Cross, so on Good Friday many of you as individuals flash across the priest’s mind in those few brief moments as he pleads to God on your behalf, begging God to console those who weep or who are in pain, to comfort those who mourn, to heal those who are sick, to bring back to the One True God those who have strayed, and to forgive the sins of all.

There are those Christians who argue that we need only ever to pray to God directly and on our own behalf, yet God Himself has appointed a mediator, and has seen fit to arrange things so that a fallen human race is raised up to friendship with God once more through that Mediator. That Mediator is, of course, Our Lord Jesus Christ. It is He who has emptied Himself and taken the form of a servant; it is He who has humbled Himself in obedience to the point of death; it is He who has made of Himself a bridge to span the gap between a perfect God on the one hand and a sin-laden people on the other; it is He who acts as a go-between in our dealings with Almighty God.

And that same God has called each priest to act as an *alter Christus*, as another Christ, so that the work Our Lord began on earth two thousand years ago might be continued down all the ages of human history. And that is exactly what is happening this afternoon.

Today, we do far more than simply recall the death of Christ on the Cross: we enter into Christ's sacrificial act and plead with Him, to God the Father, for the forgiveness of our sins, and for the ransoming, the healing, and the restoration of our fallen human race. In a few moments we shall creep to the Cross. As we come up the central aisle, we shall genuflect at each of the three cushions, and then kneel as we kiss the feet of Our Lord on the Cross. In this act of veneration, we say sorry for our sins, we beg Him to have mercy on us, and we promise to offend Him no more, just as we do every time we go to the Sacrament of Confession. Collectively and individually we undertake an act of penitence and offer to God a simple yet profound penance, namely a spiritual and physical act of worship towards our dying Saviour.

Christ cries to us in the words of the prophet Micah, 'My people! What have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me!' (Micah 6:3-5).

Our act of veneration this afternoon is our answer.

Holy is God. Holy and strong. Holy Immortal One. Have mercy on us.