

The crucifix is a powerful image for Catholics. We place one prominently in every church. We hang them on the walls of our homes. Some people wear a crucifix. Sometimes other Christians charge that we don't profess the resurrection - we focus on the death of Christ. They prefer an empty cross, to imply that Christ is risen. We need both messages about Jesus - his resurrection is meaningless unless he actually died, and his death is tragic unless he actually rose.

Besides the crucifix, we also treasure images of Jesus' sorrowful mother. One of the most famous statues in the world is Michelangelo's *Pietà*, which depicts Mary holding the lifeless body of her only son. Catholics take comfort, knowing that both Jesus and his mother suffered. We probably don't suffer any more than other Christians do, but perhaps we reflect more on our sufferings. The injustices of life bother us. And we have always bolstered our faith with images - statues, paintings, windows and crucifixes, that give us a visible means of connecting with invisible realities. Suffering is very real in our lives, so it helps us to see that Christ our Lord and his Blessed Mother suffered as well.

In the gospel, Jesus predicts he will suffer, die and rise, and that his disciples will follow him in all these ways. We also heard Zechariah prophecy about suffering and hope. He imagines a suffering that is especially horrible - the death of one's only son. He imagines a scene in which someone dear to the community has died: "they shall mourn for him as one mourns for an only son, and they shall grieve over him as one grieves over a firstborn." The gospels use this passage as a prophecy for the crucifixion because of this line: "They shall look on him whom they have pierced." The tragedy here is not just that a beloved person has died, but that the people who loved this person somehow contributed to the death - they were not careful with their words and deeds. Still, just as resurrection follows crucifixion, so God's mercy is poured upon those who grieve. Zechariah prophesies that God will forgive the people who now repent: "On that day there shall be open to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, a fountain to purify from sin and uncleanness." Even if our sins have contributed to the misfortunes of others, God will still love us with a fountain of mercy.

That is why we sang Psalm 63 today: "My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God." We are thirsting for that fountain of mercy. Incredibly, we can never completely drink it in. God's love for us is so immense and so complete, that God always has more mercy than we can ever drink or need. The crucifix is above all a sign of this mercy. Our sins may contribute to the suffering of others; but God's mercy overcomes our sins.