



I've seen this piece of art before, when I was a boy, in my teens and now in middle age. But it was this last time that it actually spoke to my inner spirit.

The piece of art I am referring to is Michaelangelo's *Pieta*, in St Peter's Rome. As I looked at the *Pieta* this time it was after 34 years in religious life and 27 years as a priest, with quite a bit of struggle along the way. Looking at it after well over half of one's life is quite different from seeing it aged 12, more interested in Italian ice cream than Italian religious art.

The first thing I was drawn to was the face of Mary as she held her dead son. Her eyes were not looking up to heaven for answers or meaning. Maybe the words of the Psalmist were in her mind. "My eyes are weary from looking upwards" She is looking at the dead body of him who was flesh of her flesh, whom she gave the milk of her breast to.

Michaelangelo has carved the body of Christ as the perfect male body but very much dead. Rigor mortis has set in, one of the legs of Christ is in an awkward position, the foot of the other leg rests on a severely pruned tree trunk, symbolising youth cut off in its prime. But the pruning though severe in the extreme, has not killed the tree, new and stronger growth will come from it.

Last year and already this year, no matter how optimistic we may be on New Year's Eve, brings the same mix of profound sadness and glimpses of hope. But always the same mix.

Here at T.H.O.M.A.S., we see young people getting well in our rehab, whilst at the same time we see young people dying from an inner pain, from an illness of meaning, that almost seems intractable and there are no easy answers either from above or below. Death and dying is always on the menu here but so is the bread and wine of love and compassion, and also in our house where so much hope and pain is, the Eucharist is celebrated daily, bread broken for a better world.

The Easter experience coming up begins by looking into an empty grave. A grave of course that we are destined for ourselves. This is not morbid thinking, but a reality that keeps us humble before God and each other.

Every life and every death has meaning, no life however short is a waste. All this is summed up for me in the poem, "Death of an Irish woman," it might at first seem that she was a woman of no importance, but for me I found her moving and real.

"Ignorant, in the sense  
 She eat monotonous food  
 And thought the world was flat,  
 And pagan.....  
 I loved her from the day she died.  
 She was a summer dance at the crossroads,  
 She was a card game where a nose was broken.  
 She was a song that nobody sings,  
 She was a language seldom spoken,  
 She was a child's purse, full of useless things"

Michael Hartnett.

I guess we need to stay with our pain, our disintegrations, our deaths, like Mary holding her crucified son, rather than losing ourselves in religious certainties, or in togetherness. The privilege of our Christian faith is that we will be forever running to catch up with the spirit of God, always trying to make sense of our reality, no matter how futile it often feels.

# Every life has meaning

A Reflection for Lent.

Father John Michael Hanvey