

Holy Thursday

Homily

John 13:1-15

8th April 2020

Tonight we enter into the 3 *Holiest days* of the year called the *Sacred Triduum*. During these three days we celebrate the Paschal Mysteries. These three days consists of ceremonies dating from the Upper Room in its simplicity down through the ages up to our times. These three days are sanctified by the very mysteries celebrated. From Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday the entire ceremony is one long liturgy which begins tonight and culminates with the celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord.

One of the ancient Fathers of the Church writing in the 2nd century authored a poem on the Paschal Mysteries and I quote a small section below to show the beauty and significance of these days:

*2) Therefore, well-beloved, understand,
how the mystery of the Pascha is both new and old,
eternal and provisional,
perishable and imperishable,
mortal and immortal.*

*3) It is old with respect to the law,
new with respect to the word.
Provisional with respect to the type,
yet everlasting through grace.
It is perishable because of the slaughter of the sheep,
imperishable because of the life of the Lord.
It is mortal because of the burial in the ground,
immortal because of the resurrection from the dead.*

(Melito of Sardis, On the Pasch No.2-3)

Tonight's St John's account of the Last Supper launches us into this Triduum this year. Interestingly, St John is the only one who records the 'Washing of the Feet.' Why did St John to record this which St Matthew, St Mark and St Luke did not? What's its significance? In St Luke's Gospel, we are given a hint.

And he said to them, 'I have ardently longed to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; because, I tell you, I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' Then, taking a cup, he gave thanks and said, 'Take this and share it among you, because from now on, I tell you, I shall never again drink wine until the kingdom of God comes.' Then he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.' He did the same with the cup after supper, and said, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood poured out for you. 'But look, here with me on the table is the hand of the man who is betraying me. The Son of man is indeed on the path which was decreed, but alas for that man by whom he is betrayed!' And they began to ask one another which of them it could be who was to do this. An argument also began between them about who should be reckoned the greatest (Luke 22:15-24).''

St Luke details Jesus' words to the Apostles with words to this effect, *"the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who leads like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the*

table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines? But I am among you as the One who serves. (Luke 19:26-27)."

I suspect the Apostles would have found this teaching new and foreign. This is what I mean. In the ancient world, *to serve* was something servants were expected to provide their superiors or masters. Basically, this was what slaves were for. *Domestic slaves* were servants of a household and were considered essential to that household. *Service or having servants and/or slavery* were almost one and the same thing. In those days, a person's greatness is measured by the number of their servants or slaves apart from their nobility or famous deeds or status. Jesus' words and actions in St Luke's and St John's account of the Last Supper would have been radical and different. When we combine Luke's and John's account of the Last Supper we see *an icon* of the face of God.

What is this *icon* of the face of God? *It is love – Love.* But this is not new in the true sense of the word. In the Old Testament the ancient call to Israel is echoed: *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up (Deuteronomy 6:4-7)."* Jesus on his part made references to this in his parables particularly the parable of the Good Samaritan. But tonight he shows it in a concrete way.

Charity/love is the cornerstone of the Gospel and the bedrock of the Church. *In its essence this love is two-fold: the service/love of God and the service/love of neighbour.* In recording the Washing of the Feet St John is emphasizing Jesus' teaching and example that *Service is non-negotiable in the Christian life and Christian leadership.* In this case for the Apostles - *in their Office as Apostles who received gift of the priesthood that night.*

It is no accident therefore that the Holy Spirit inspired St John to record the *'washing of the feet'* in his Gospel which we heard tonight. Much can be said about this but in brief the example of Jesus reminds us something essential about our identity in Christ as adopted children of God. *We are called to be Love in the heart of every human activity – in the joys and sufferings of each day. We are called to be Love in the heart of the Church – 'in the good times and in the bad.'* St Paul would later on in his letters encourage the early Christian community thus *"...outdo one another in brotherly charity... (Romans 12:10)."*

What does Jesus' gesture say to us about the gift of the Eucharist and the Priesthood which he instituted during the Last Supper? Many things really but as a starting point it tells us that the Eucharist *is Love itself which fills the whole Church each time it is celebrated.* Just as the Apostles became *what they received when they first received the Eucharist (St Augustine)* so too the Church *'is made'* each time the Eucharist is celebrated. *The Eucharist makes the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist (Henri de Lubac).* Thus *the Church is constantly being renewed each time Mass is offered. Thus the Church is constantly being renewed each time the Eucharist is celebrated – with or without a congregation. No Synod or Plenary Council can renew the Church in the same way one single Mass does!* This impels all of us to cherish this gift and deepen our faith in it. This urges us *to mirror the loving gift of Jesus in the way we donate ourselves, our intentions, our time and our lives for the sake of others.* In giving to the Church the gift of the Eucharist during that same Supper Our Lord established the new worship of the New Covenant in his Blood. In showing how his followers should love one another he mandated the way that covenant is lived in love. *Then and only then will they know that we are Christians (John 13:35).*

From this perspective I hope we can appreciate and discover anew the gift of the Priesthood. The priesthood cannot be isolated from the Eucharist. We need the service of priests in order to have the Eucharist. Christ is the True High Priest of the New and Everlasting Covenant who gave us the Eucharist so that he will be *with us until he comes again (Matthew 28:20).* We are assured of this whenever we see the Eucharist elevated or visit the tabernacle. Hence the pain we all feel during this time at the current closure of churches and suspension of Masses. Your

yearning to be present again at Mass and receive the Eucharist is because you have also tasted the goodness of the Lord (Psalm 34) and have come to know that Christ's Presence in the Eucharist is *True and Real*.

The Risen Lord is with us in his True and Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. The very fabric of the priesthood of Jesus Christ is his *Real Presence in the Eucharist*. The Eucharist is the living core of the Church his Body of earth. *The Eucharist is the Risen Lord Truly Present but hidden among his people under the appearance of bread and wine*. In turn Christ's presence is visibly recognisable in a particular way through the priest(s) his servant who lives among his people as we do in our parishes for example. The gift of the priesthood enables the priest *through grace* to love as Christ loves. Priestly service is therefore the total donation of the self for the sake of Jesus and his Bride the Church. For us priests the 'washing the feet of the Apostles as recounted by the Gospel' is a divine mandate to our ministerial life and care of souls. Christ's example is a reminder that *we are but merely servants*.

To serve others is a visible way of showing to the world the self-donation of Jesus on the Cross. In humble service we show the face of God. Christian service encompasses the worship of God above all things and the service of our neighbour in all things. When we live this way with generosity of heart our *faith and identity in Christ crystalizes*. *We grow to become icons of Christ – "our eyes become the eyes through which he looks with compassion upon the earth (St Theresa of Avila)." Love and service is the measure of a person's authentic and mature faith in Jesus Christ*. The love of Christ urges us (2 Cor 5:14) and so we follow his lead knowing that *'the fruit of love is service and the fruit of service is peace (Mother Teresa).'*

May you have a blessed and safe Triduum!

Fr Epeli



*Altar of Repose
Holy Thursday 2020
St Michael's Catholic Church
Meadowbank*