

Holy Thursday

Tonight we begin the Sacred Triduum, the most important days in the liturgical year of the Church. This year I decided to have a four word homily for each of the three parts of these holiest days of the year. No, this does not mean I am going to say four words and sit down, rather it means I will give you four words to sum up what I hope to share with you.

Jesus is gathered together with his disciples, and he is there to tell them how much he loves them, how much he cares for them, and also how he must leave them. And so the great joy of gathering around the Passover feast is tinged with sorrow.

You would reasonably think at the celebration of this Mass of The Last Supper, that the Gospel would be about the institution of the Eucharist, and yet we have this very different gospel text.

Jesus, having told his disciples how much he longed to be with them, he takes off his outer garment and he goes to the outside, really, and he brings in the bowl with which the servants wash the feet of those who come to the banquet.

And Jesus comes back with the water and he kneels down in front of each of them and he begins to wash their feet.

And he comes to St. Peter and a pin could drop through the whole dining hall. And Peter, as we know, is an impetuous man and he sees his Lord and master degrading himself in this way and he says to him, "You're not going to wash my feet."

And then Jesus says something even more strange. He says to them, he says, "Peter, if you do not let me wash your feet, you will never know who I am. You can have nothing, nothing, to do with me, because you will never understand."

And then Peter, as usual with his ups and downs, he cries out, "Not only, not only my feet, but my head and my shoulders and my arms and my whole self," because if there's one thing that Peter knows, he does not want to lose the love he feels for this person who has changed his life.

And then Jesus proceeds, one after the other, washing their feet, drying their feet.

And finally he goes back, puts on his garment, and he says to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"

And of course they don't. And they're quite silent.

He said, "You call me Lord and master, and that's what I am. I am your Lord and I am your master, but I have washed your feet." And then there is a great pause and he says, "I do this, because you will never know who I am until you wash each other's feet."

So tonight's four word homily is: "Go and wash feet."

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This is the meaning of the Eucharist. This is the meaning of why he, the Son of God, came down to share our humanity, that we might share in an understanding of the great dignity that God has given us and the great gift that he continues to give us each day.

It seems like, from one point of view, that what Jesus is doing is playing a game or making a parable by what he does. How can the Son of God kneel down in front of these men who, in a very, very short time will run away from him when he needs them most.

One will betray him. Another will deny him three times, their leader. Jesus knows that this is all going to happen.

Why and what does it mean? When he kneels down, what does Jesus see?

He sees the humanity of all of them, and he loves them in a human way. But he also sees the presence of God. He knows that each one has been formed individually, particularly, out of the greatness and glory of God. And each one is worthy of respect, because, not for what he is, but what he has become when God created him in His God's image and likeness.

What Jesus is really doing is telling the truth of who they really are. They are not, even in the most remote way, even near an understanding of the greatness of being the children, the beloved sons and daughters, those made in the image of a loving Father.

When Jesus looks at people he says: You're not fishermen, you're not just ordinary people, because when I look at you, I see what you really are. I look to the depths of your heart. I know when you weep and I know when you laugh. And I know the storm about your life. I know the troubles you have and I know your ambitions.

And this is what we must understand: he's sending us out now to look at other people the way he looks at them.

The teaching, then, of tonight's Gospel is that we must, as Jesus once said to his disciples and to the people of his time, "You have eyes to see, but you're blind; you have ears to hear, but you're deaf; you have hearts to love, but you don't." And because of that, the great mystery in each other is lost.

What Jesus is saying is: when you learn how to serve, you will learn how to live; and when you learn to love others, you will understand what love is; and when you learn to give happiness and joy to people, you will understand what it means to be happy and full of joy.

The real meaning of this gospel is will we learn to love as Jesus loves, will we realize that we are surrounded by the great mystery and love of God who is with us all our days.

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The way we understand it is by turning to each other and saying, "Let me help you, let me serve you, let me take care of you."

This is the lesson of tonight, it is the lesson of tomorrow, and it is the lesson of new life. Jesus says, "The one who gives their life away, will have life in abundance." So, let us go and wash feet.