

18th April 2019 (Holy Thursday, Year C)

Exodus 12:1-8,11-14; Psalm 115(116):12-13,15-18; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-15.

'Do you understand' he said 'what I have done to you?'

Today, as we start the most solemn three-day celebration of our liturgical year, we are invited to reflect on the narration of Jesus' last supper according to the gospel of John. While the other three gospels focus on Jesus giving his body and blood to the disciples as food for the journey, John only speaks of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. By the time the fourth gospel was written (around the year 90), the narration of the last supper celebrated at the 'breaking of the bread,' was already an established institution in the community of believers, so John shifts his focus on something else; service.

We are told that at the last supper, Jesus took off his outer robe and, dressed like a slave, with a towel around his waist, knelt in front of each of the disciples and washed their feet. This action is in itself an action of great humility and service. People either walked barefoot or in sandals and the streets were covered in dust. One could only imagine what the disciples' feet would have looked and smelt like. No wonder that Peter refused to have Jesus wash his feet. This job is so degrading that only slaves wash the master's feet. On the other hand, having your feet washed after at the end of the day, after a long walk, is very soothing and comforting. In the letter to the Philippians, Paul tells us that Jesus 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave....' (2:7). We can already see this happening at the last supper.

Jesus then sat down and addressed those around him: 'You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.' (Jn 13:13-15). Over the centuries the community of the faithful has understood the gravity of this action and re-lives it each year as part of the celebration of Easter as a reminder of the need for us all to be of service to each other.

Traditionally Holy Thursday is also seen as the moment when Jesus instituted the ministerial priesthood. Placing priesthood next to the washing of the feet is also very significant, and I think it is an very important reflection to make given the environment we are living in. There is the argument that priests are ontologically different to the rest of the faithful. It is understood that, like baptism and confirmation, holy orders delivers a seal, a branding, upon those who receive it. Branding of slaves and animals is a permanent mark on the person's skin to indicate ownership. All Christians belong to Christ and with him share in his office of king, prophet and priest. Similarly priests are also branded, but this second branding is a branding of service. If priesthood makes those who receive it more like Christ, then, like him, they need to be of service towards their sisters and brothers in faith.

I find it very significant that as part of our celebration today, I am invited to kneel in front of a number of members in our parish and wash their feet. This is a symbolic gesture, but it is a great reminder that my first role among you is to be your servant, after Jesus who said: 'I have come not to be served but to serve.' (Mt 20:28). Holy orders is a ministry of washing of the feet. It is not a ministry that seeks its own glory, but one that seeks to be of service to all who believe.

As we celebrate today, I ask you to continue praying for all our priests, and especially for myself, so that I may continue to have the courage to serve the community faithfully.

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