

Homily: Maundy Thursday
(April 21, 2011)

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” There is a lot happening in our liturgy this evening; so many symbolic actions, so many living metaphors, all of them signifying and proclaiming the substance of our faith – making real what we believe, why we believe, and the One in whom we believe. They are doorways through which we draw nearer the Passion of Christ.

On this night we celebrate the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, commemorating the final Passover meal he had with his apostles. But we do more than just commemorate a meal. We actually participate in it. Every time we celebrate what was to become the sacrament of the Eucharist we are transported in time and space to that moment of institution.

When we share this meal, when we offer this sacrifice, we are giving thanks and praise in the first person, for God’s deliverance of Israel from the tyranny of Egypt at the first Passover as well as the sacrifice offered by the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ at the Christian Passover, which has procured our deliverance from the tyranny of sin and death.

It was at this meal with his apostles that Christ set a perpetual example of service for his disciples. And so tonight we will wash feet according to his command: “For I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you.” Doing this we embody

and live out the very same humility that led Christ to the ultimate expression of servanthood, the Cross.

This lived humility is so much more than just the priest and deacon washing some people's feet. It is a metaphor that holds forth way of living, an attitude of being that all Christians are to embody in their day to day relationships, especially with those who lie outside of our comfort zones.

We humans are very good at avoiding those people we don't like. We so easily turn our faces away from the annoying and frustrating. When anxiety is strong enough, we even have it within ourselves to turn that fear into public acts of condemnation and spite.

Now if anyone had a "right" to behave this way it was Jesus. Here is the Lord of Glory, the Son of God, the Almighty incarnate come to his own and his own know him not. He has come down from heaven to jeers and derision. No respect. No worldly glory, only scorn and malice.

"Hosannas" quickly fading in the wind of fancy and whim as expectations are dashed and worldly hopes ruined and the crowd disperses in contempt. No one gets him. No one understands, not even his closest friends. Even his family thinks he is nuts.

And in the face of all this scorn and ignorance this Lord of Glory removes his outer robe, bends down and washes their feet. He takes humility one step further and becomes the servant of a humanity that despises and rejects him. He cleans the dirt from their feet then turns around and offers his body to be broken and his blood to be poured out to clean the dirt from their souls. He is still offering his holy Body and precious Blood as St. Paul says, "As often as we gather to eat this bread and drink this cup."

If all of this weren't enough, on this night we also commemorate Our Lord's institution of the priesthood. By "priesthood" I mean both the institutional Order of the Priesthood – those who would later consecrate the Sacrament of his Body and Blood in his name and by his power – as well as the priesthood of all believers, the ministry of all the baptized who are nourished at this altar so you in turn can go out and nourish the world by your words and deeds.

All of these signs and actions speak to us of the majesty of Christ and at the height of their proclamation, we will abruptly silence them. We will remove the symbols of our faith, violently thrusting us into the fullness of the night of Christ's Passion. As with the soul throughout the journey of Lent the church will be stripped bare, layer by layer, until there is nothing left but the emptiness of the tomb.

Once exposed, the altar will be washed with water and wine – symbolizing the blood and water that poured forth from the wounded side of Christ – prepared to receive the body of Jesus.

When we have been thus stripped, and our hearts washed we will gather with the apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane to keep vigil with our Lord. We will struggle to stay awake and pray with Christ, becoming increasingly aware of the weakness of the flesh, watching as great drops of bloody sweat drop from Christ's holy brow furrowed in contemplation of the suffering he will undergo for love of you and me.

This time of vigil is a time for contemplation. In the silence we are invited to reflect upon our own suffering in the light of the suffering and shame of Christ. Sitting in the darkness of the church we wrestle with the darkness inside each of us, offering all that we find in prayer and confession to Christ who alone can redeem us.

Then, when the hour comes for the Son of Man to be betrayed the Body and Blood, the bread and the wine will be taken away and we will depart from the garden. We will scatter in the darkness; poignantly aware of our culpability in what is to come.

And we know what is to come. The shadows cannot hide the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Suffering, upon which the Son of Man has chosen to walk. We must walk it with him. We must watch him be whipped with the flagellum – a stick with four leather straps at the end of which are tied jagged pieces of metal and bone. We must watch his holy face be spit upon by soldiers, his kingly head crowned with thorns, his precious blood flow gently down his brow.

We must watch and walk for it is for us that he goes. It is for us that he embraces the tree of death, stumbling under its mortal weight, dragging its burden – along with our sins – to the Place of the Skull where he will open his arms to the world in love and in turn receive nails in his hands. Where His parched mouth will cry out to the Father for our forgiveness and receive bitter gall to drink.

We must watch and walk with Christ. We cannot hide, we cannot turn away, but we must meet his swollen eyes as they look upon us with a love we cannot fathom; a depth of love that is prepared to go to the very depths of hell to save us.

And we must answer his question: “How far are *you* willing to go to return the favour?”