

Holy Thursday—Lord's Supper

The First Reading of today from the Book of Exodus speaks about the first Hebrew passover meal. This meal was, and still is a commemoration of one of the greatest events in the history of the Israelites as God's people, namely, their liberation from slavery in Egypt. Passover feast is celebrated by the Jewish communities round the world every year and Passover meal is a re-enactment of that hasty meal the Israelite people had to take before their flight across the Red Sea from Egypt. It was a flight from slavery to freedom and liberation. The meal is full of symbols - the lamb eaten whole, the blood of the lamb painted on the door posts, the unleavened bread, the bitter herbs, eating the meal standing and dressed ready for a long journey. It is a sacred remembering of God's great act to liberate them from slavery and the beginning of their long trek to the Promised Land.

This Passover meal obviously was a very special occasion. It was no coincidence that it was precisely during the celebration of this private Passover meal with his disciples that Jesus instituted what we now call the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. And along with this, he also instituted the Sacrament of the Ministerial Priesthood.

In the Second Reading of today in his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul recalls what Jesus did during that Passover meal, that Last Supper. Jesus transformed his Last Supper into the first Eucharistic celebration - "While they were eating Jesus took the Bread, said the blessing, broke it and giving it to his disciples said, '*Take and eat, this is my Body.*' Then he took a cup, gave thanks and gave it to them saying, '*Drink from it all of you for this is the blood of the covenant which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.*' " Jesus thus instituted the Holy Eucharist as the sign and reality of God's perpetual presence with His people as their living, heavenly food, in the form of bread and wine. This was followed by the institution of the Ministerial Priesthood with the command, "Do this in memory of me."

Here is the link between the Hebrew and the Christian Covenants. There is no mention of a lamb because there is a new lamb, Jesus himself is the Pascal Lamb. He served as both the Host and the Victim of a sacrifice and became the Lamb of God, who would take away the sins of the world. He is the sacrificial victim of the New Covenant whose blood will adorn the wood of the cross. In this meal, the emphasis is on the unleavened bread and Body, on wine and Blood. This meal becomes now the sacrament of a new liberation, not just from physical slavery, but from every kind of slavery, especially that of sin and evil, through the broken Body of Jesus and his poured out Blood on the cross. This becomes the basis for the celebration of the Eucharist, which is at the heart of all our Catholic Christian living.

In the Gospel Reading of today, we have the Evangelist John's account of the Last Supper, and its choice is very significant. At first sight, it may seem rather a strange choice for this evening when the institution of the Eucharist isn't mentioned at all. St. John in his Last Supper account makes no mention of the bread being Jesus' Body and the wine being his Blood. Instead, we have the totally unexpected act of Jesus, '*washing the feet of his*

disciples,' a service assigned to household servants, and concluding the ceremony with a long speech incorporating his '*commandment of love*' - "Love one another as I have loved you."

Washing of the feet of his disciples is actually a prophetic action of Jesus, which we re-enact and re-present in our liturgy this evening. It is a powerful sign of readiness to be of '*loving service*' to others. Before sitting down to the Paschal meal, getting down on his knees and washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus, Lord and Master, gave us all a lesson in humble service. While he washed the feet of his disciples, Jesus was only too aware of the bickering among his disciples as to who was the greatest, and who should rank before the other. The disciples have yet to learn that in the Kingdom, in the world of Christ, the leader is one who serves. It is a message for us priests, parents, teachers, employers, managers, chief executives...

At the end Jesus asks, "Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should do also do." In commanding his disciples to do the same he echoes the words at the Eucharist, "Do this in remembrance of me."

So, the first thing Jesus wanted his friends to remember him by was his service. Not a grudging, unwilling, compulsory service, but a service born out of love. No tokenism here. Being really at the beck and call of others, allowing oneself to be used and abused, as servants are. "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life for the ransom of many."

The Gospel Reading of today is not off point or out of place as it may appear at first sight; it is actually in perfect harmony with the other two Scripture Readings, for Eucharist and loving service to others go together. There is obviously a clear and important link here between the two. We cannot choose one over the other. Just as we are nourished by the body and blood of Jesus, we are also called to nourish others materially and spiritually. Just as the body of Jesus is broken up for us, we are also called to be broken up for others. Our Catholic Christian living is a seamless robe between Gospel, liturgy and daily life and interaction. There is something lacking if we are devout in our regular attendance at Mass but our lives are lived individualistically and selfishly. There is also something lacking if we are totally committed to caring for others but never gather in community to remember, give thanks and break the bread together.

Our Eucharist only becomes real after we leave the church. If the celebration of the Eucharist stops at the Church door, it is a sign and celebration of nothing. It is a kind of sacrilege to claim to recognize Christ in the bread and wine and not in those around us. The Eucharist, if it is to be real, is essentially the sign of a living, loving, mutually serving community of brothers and sisters. A living, loving community celebrates and strengthens what it is through the Eucharist. It is this spirit of love and service of brothers and sisters which is to be the outstanding characteristic of the Christian disciple. And this is the true

living out of the Eucharistic celebration. To have one without the other is not to live the Gospel.

What Jesus did on that Holy Thursday night and the following day on Golgotha comes down through all of time and touches each and every one of us. Jesus loved each of us then and he loves each of us now. The love Jesus shows is not limited by time or space - it cannot be, because his love is eternal. Therefore we gratefully proclaim - "HE LOVED HIS OWN IN THE WORLD AND HE LOVED THEM TO THE VERY END."

- Fr. David M. Chiantella