

Homily for Holy Thursday 2010

Tonight's mass is principally about actions more than about words. The first reading contains precise instructions for the celebration of a Passover meal; the second reading is St. Paul's summary of the Last Supper which is also the origin and the inauguration of the mass; the gospel tells us how Jesus began that supper. This mass is heavy with meaning and purpose, as we celebrate God's gift of the priesthood, which is the way in which he chooses to make the actions of Christ present to us, and the gift of the Eucharist, by which he makes the power of Christ present to us, and this strange story of ritual foot-washing. But in the middle of this third activity, the smooth progress of the Lord's actions is interrupted by an exchange of words. All the other disciples have quietly accepted the washing of their feet by Christ. Even Judas, who has already decided to betray him, allows the Lord to kneel in front of him and wash his feet; but once Jesus reaches Peter, this most impetuous and outspoken of men cannot keep silent. The steady silent progress around the table is halted for this brief exchange of words. 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Peter asks. He addresses Jesus as Lord, and in doing this he not only acknowledges the reality of the relationship between them, gladly accepting that Jesus is his Lord and thus Peter is the subject, but in doing this he highlights the madness of what is going on. Who ever heard of a Lord washing the feet of his subjects? Peter can see the scene from outside, he can visualise it as an observer might see it, and it looks like madness. The Lord of glory, the only-begotten Son of God, has stripped and humiliated himself, and now is kneeling on the dirty floor like a slave washing the feet of a poor, foolish, often wayward and uncomprehending fisherman. It simply cannot be. Peter is concerned for Jesus dignity. This is not how he wants it to be. He is very happy to sit at Jesus feet and listen to him teach, but he cannot sit himself while Jesus kneels.

Jesus is very patient. He is not surprised that Peter has not understood yet, but Peter just becomes even more emphatic 'you will never wash my feet' he says. He remains appalled. He has seen Jesus raise the dead; he has seen him heal the sick; he has seen him drive out demons; he has glimpsed his glory in the Transfiguration, and he has caught sight of him as the Messiah on Palm Sunday; he has heard him preaching day after day for years, preaching about love, and hope, and forgiveness, and freedom. Peter is deeply aware of how great the gap between Christ and himself seems to be, how much more wise, and holy, and powerful Christ is, but yet he is kneeling at Peter's feet. 'You will never do it'. Peter is adamant that he should not be so exalted, and Christ should not be so humiliated. But Jesus insists. Unless Peter is washed, he cannot be united with Jesus. Jesus is creating in this Last Supper the priesthood of the new covenant, a priesthood that is marked out by men who allow themselves to be taken over by Christ so that they can become more like him, and can present him to the world. To become a part of this Peter must first submit himself to receiving from Christ. The priest must be totally open to Christ, and just at the moment Peter is not. Peter does not understand what the Lord is doing, and so he will not accept it; if he is to be united with Christ in his priesthood, he must learn to accept Christ's will, whether he understands it or not, whether he likes it or not. So wash the rest of me as well - the more I am washed, the more of a share in you I will have. But it is not so. Once again Peter is trying to take control, to manipulate Christ for his own ends, to make him do what Peter wants. Gently, tenderly, patiently, Christ leads Peter on until at last he understands.

This is not simply a story about serving one another, caring for one another, loving one another, although it is all of that. It is also a story about humility. It challenges us to accept what Christ wills, rather than trying to impose upon him what we want, above all our own image of what he should be. It reminds us that Christ has gladly left behind the glory and the security of Heaven so as humbly to live among us, as one of us, vulnerable to us. When one has accepted so much humiliation, kneeling in the dust is hardly falling much further. The disciples were reluctant to accept Jesus the suffering Messiah, indeed in the end it was just too much for Judas, yet this story challenges us to accept Jesus as he really is, not as we might wish him to be. This is an absolute condition of being able to serve him. We focus in this story on the figure of the kneeling Jesus, and that is quite right and proper; but we should not neglect the men whose feet he washes. As they acquiesce and let the water flow over their feet they are accepting Jesus for what he really is, and so one by one they become united to him in a unique way. They do not understand him, yet they trust him. In doing so it is as if they look up from the table, and across the gap of two thousand years look us in the eye they ask us, are we prepared to let the water flow? Are we prepared to accept the Lord as he really is? Are we prepared to accept him in his weakness, his vulnerability, his refusal to fight back? Will we let him kneel in front of us, half-dressed and humiliated? Are we tempted to shout 'never' as we try to make him more like the Jesus we want him to be, or do we have the courage to let Jesus be what the Father has called him to be? To kneel and wash the feet of your friends does require humility; but to allow your saviour, your hope, the embodiment of all your dreams, that is no easy task either