

Maundy Thursday 2020

Gospel: *John 13.1-17, 31-35*

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.

And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.' After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? 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. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

When Judas son of Simon Iscariot had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Homily

Tonight the doors of all churches are firmly closed – for the time being at least, to help prevent a lethal infection from spreading among us. But the sacred three days of the Church, like the Jewish Passover to which they are linked, simply cannot be rescheduled or cancelled, any more than you can reschedule or cancel the moon! Thus, like the slow opening wide of the massive western doors of some great cathedral, tonight's celebration of the Eucharist will once again begin the Church's annual commemoration of a sequence of events which transformed the world.

Moreover, tonight's Eucharist begins but doesn't finish. Like the unique Supper in the Upper Room that it commemorates, it 'dissolves' as Jesus with his disciples slips away through the city wall on his night passage across the valley to Gethsemene. Events become unstoppable: the betrayal, the arrest, the imprisonment, the trial, the condemnation, the *via crucis*, the crucifixion, the deposition and entombment, and the rising again to what the Orthodox call the 'Day without evening'. So it may be more accurate to say tonight's Eucharist starts but *can never finish*.

Famously St John introduces this moment in his gospel (13.1) when he says, 'It was just before Passover, and Jesus – knowing that his hour had come to depart from the world, and having loved his own who were in the world – loved them to the utter limit.' He *recognized the moment* that he had long tried to teach the disciples about, and accepted it. 'When the time came for him to be glorified by you, his heavenly Father, he *showed* the depth of his love.'

The first fruit of Jesus's recognition and acceptance is the first Eucharist. While he still had his freedom, he handed himself over into his disciples hands, in the sacrament that would embody him not just for the

meanwhile, but on countless of occasions since. ‘Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?’, he’d once asked them. Well, ‘Do this, as often as you drink it, in memory of me’.

We see the same movement of Jesus’s spirit in his prayer in Gethsemene. ‘Not what *I* will but what *you* Father will’ (Mk 14:36c). Jesus found his complete fulfilment in being total abandoned to the Father. His human will clung to the divine will, and he restored to human beings the possibility of an unreserved ‘yes’ to God.

2

Why might all this be so important? How might this answer or console the fear, and suffering, and grief, with which we are surrounded, and which indeed invades our hearts too. Or how, for that matter might it support the courage, generosity and compassion that so many are showing in their self-less work outside their homes?

Faced with such a question I would point to the fact that the death of Jesus is quite unlike death as human beings normally face it. Human lives are normally we say ‘lost’, ‘taken away’ by age, sickness, violence and war. In some cases – the bravery of soldiers, for example; or the selflessness of medics and carers such as we are seeing in every land today – life is *risked* and *spent* in the course of service or duty. But Jesus, having freely *accepted* his death, *gave himself away for love of us*, to heal and reconcile us. It’s what is meant by the familiar words ‘Before he was given up to death, a death he willingly accepted, he took bread, gave it to his disciples, and said ‘This is my body, which will be given up for you.’

Therefore this death, unlike any other human death, is redemptive, and gives us reason to hope in God’s grace and mercy towards us: hope that *in all circumstances* our lives and our deaths, and the lives and deaths of our loves ones, can be identified with *his*, who identified his life and his death with us.

3

We do all already know this. Whenever we pray ‘Our Father, who art in heaven’, we ask ‘thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ (Mt 6:10). Whenever we pray those very familiar words we recognize that there is a will of God for human lives, a will that we must try to accept as the basis of our own wills, and words, and actions. And we are given the assurance that wherever on earth that will is done, becomes ‘as it is in heaven’, where love, goodness, truth and beauty are present, and ‘death and crying and pain will be no more’ (Rev 21.4).

Prayer

FATHER, I raise to thee my whole being, a vessel emptied of self. Accept Lord, this emptiness, and so fill me with thyself, thy Light, thy Life, thy Love, that these thy precious gifts may over-flow the chalice of my heart into the hearts of anyone I meet, revealing unto them the beauty of thy joy and wholeness, and the serenity of thy peace which nothing can destroy. Amen.