

Holy Thursday, 2016

First Reading: Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 *This day shall be a memorial feast celebrating the Passover*

Psalms 116 "Our blessing-cup is a communion with the Blood of Christ"

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 *Do this in remembrance of me ...*

as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the death of the Lord.

Alleluia Verse: "I give you a new commandment, says the Lord: love one another as I have loved you."

Gospel: John 13:1-16 *Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, and commands them to do likewise.*

♪ *Ubi caritas et amor, ubi caritas, Deus ibi est.* ♪

Do you know what those Latin words mean?

There is another hymn that says the same thing in English.

♪ *Where charity and love prevail, there God is ever found.*

Brought here together by Christ's love, by love are we thus bound. ♪

Ubi caritas et amor, [where there is charity and love], *Deus ibi est* -[God is present].

Those words are part of the ancient tradition of the re-enactment of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at the last supper.

Jesus *shocks* his disciples by serving them as only a slave would serve, and then *scares* them by commanding them to do the same. He says clearly, "As I have done, so you must do."

And what is it that any disciple of Jesus must do? It is in the Gospel verse for today, "*I give you a new commandment, says the Lord: love one another as I have loved you.*"

Washing feet is a living, practical - and somewhat messy sign of how far Jesus was willing to go to show his love for us. And when we let him love us, it makes a difference in our lives.

I remember a time when I was in campus ministry at St. Bonaventure University. I was responsible for organizing the Holy Thursday Liturgy. I asked representatives of all the groups on campus to have their feet washed at the Mass of the Lord's Supper.

One of those I asked was an administrator named Larry. He was hesitant, like Peter in the Gospel. I thought it might be because he didn't want anyone to touch his feet - it would make him feel too vulnerable - but he told me that he had not been to Church in a long time and did not feel *worthy* to have his feet washed.

I told him that it was not a question of being worthy or not, it was about being humble enough to receive the love of Christ. He thought about it and decided to do it, and it changed his whole life.

After that Holy Thursday, he went back to regular practice of his faith and he and his wife even became presenters at retreats and gave talks about God's love and acceptance.

Larry and his wife Bonnie moved from occasionally going to church to *becoming* church.



If you had been asked to have your feet washed tonight, how would you have responded? Why? Think about that for a moment. foot-washing is not just a once a year ritual but a living *sacrament* of the way we are all called to love each other in practical ways - even when it is neither comfortable nor easy.

And sometimes it's harder to allow someone to wash my feet - or to love me. It was for Peter. But, whether we are receiving that love or giving it, it is a living sign of what it means to become a part of a Christian church - to *live* as a member of the Body of Christ.

The Gospel story you heard refers to the *Passover* of Jesus - his death on a cross and resurrection from the dead. It recalls the 1st reading, which tells the story of the Jewish Passover - but there is an important difference. Jesus did not kill anyone.

He *changes* the part of the story where God kills the firstborn of the Egyptians.

There is a story that is often a part of the Passover "haggadah" [Rabbinic stories that are told at this feast]. In this story, when the angels rejoiced at the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, God rebuked them, saying,

"The *Egyptians* are also My people, and the work of My hands."

We are still struggling with the fact that Jesus did not go to war against the Romans. In the Passion of Luke, which we heard on Palm Sunday, Jesus tells his disciples to buy a sword [Luke 22:36]. Jesus does not mean that literally - but his followers did not understand- they wanted to defeat the Romans by *force* [they would have nuked them if they could].

Jesus was reminding them - & us - that to follow him would involve a *struggle* against evil in ourselves & in the world - and that we would defeat evil the way he did - by following the same non-violent path.

The commandment to love as Jesus loved is the bridge that joins the reading from St. Paul with the Gospel story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. But to understand that connection we need to know the context of the story in the rest of chapter 11 of Paul's 1st letter to the Christians at Corinth.

Before the words we heard in the 2nd reading, Paul writes about the divisions & unresolved conflicts in the community. The more affluent and powerful in the community were the ones who owned the houses where the church gathered & provided much of the food. Paul is very strong in criticizing the way they do not wait for the poor and the slaves who are part of the community, so most of the food is gone before they arrive at the agapé meal. He says that this behavior does not respect the church of God and shames those who have nothing. Then, after telling the story of how Jesus took bread and wine and said, "Take and eat, this is my Body, this is my blood, do this in remembrance of me," he accuses the Corinthian Christians of not recognizing the Lord's Body.

When St. Paul says, "The Body of the Lord", he means *first of all* the real presence of Christ in the gathered community as well as in the bread and the wine consecrated at the Eucharist. All of us together are called & empowered to **be** the Body of Christ:
We will sing that truth during the Mass today: 🎵 *We are the Body of Christ.* 🎵

What he is saying is that you cannot claim to love Jesus if you do not care for all the members of his body & respect & support the leaders he has commissioned.

In the reading from St. Paul, we heard the words, "*do this in remembrance of me*" twice when he tells the story of the Last Supper.

In the Passion according to Luke on Palm Sunday, when the Last Supper was recalled, we heard the same words we hear during every Eucharistic Prayer "*do this in memory of me,*"

What is Jesus asking his followers to do, as he is on the brink of entering into his last hours? He is not only commanding them & us to continue to celebrate the Eucharist. He is commanding all who will follow him to allow others to wash their feet, as well as to wash the feet of others - to love one another in practical and nurturing ways, -
to *See Christ* in others & *Be Christ* for others.

He is saying to us today:

Love one another as I have loved you, do **this** in memory of me.

Forgive one another as I have forgiven you, do **this** in memory of me.

Live as my body in the world, **accept** your own participation in my passion and death,
Trust in the hope that you will rise from sin, suffering & death as I did

do this in memory of me!



We know a song that says this Gospel truth in a very powerful way. It was inspired by an event that occurred when the composer - Joe Uveges - was attending mass.

As he came to receive Communion, the priest - after saying "Body of Christ" said, "receive who you are. Joe was so moved by the truth of those words - that he was becoming the Christ he was receiving - he could hardly say amen.

He struggled to understand what had just happened, and, since he was a songwriter, wrote this song that very night. The words came to him in a matter of minutes and they sing of the truth of what happens to us when we receive the Body and lifeblood of Christ. [When Freedom Calls - Joe Uveges]

♪ Receive who you are, do not be frightened. Come say "Amen" to all of your life.
Open your heart, come and be lightened, Singing I am the body of Christ.

And I am the body of Christ, Singing I am, dancing I am.

And I am the light of the world.

Cause I see who lives in me, Yeah, Lord, I receive. ♪

