

Good Friday “To ascend we must descend”

Fr. Frank Schuster

What wondrous drama and profound love that is revealed to us on this Holy Night! Wasn't it enough that God would become human in the incarnation? No, indeed for God this was not enough. Last night, God incarnate in Jesus Christ knelt down in the dust and washed our feet, commanding us to do likewise. And for God, this too was not enough. Last night Jesus loved us by being as close to us as food and drink, in the Holy Eucharist. He didn't want to be remembered by his triumphs or displays of miraculous power, but rather through the humility of a paschal lamb. Jesus says, this is my body, do this in remembrance of me. And even this was not enough.

My friends, on this night, the omnipotent God became impotent, powerless for our sake. And in the powerlessness of death, the awesome power of God's love is revealed to us. The prophesy of psalm 139 is fulfilled, where can I hide from your love O Lord, if I run to the mountains you are there. If I run to the oceans you there. If I find myself falling to hell itself, who is there to catch me now but the God's only Son? How is that possible except by the bond of the Holy Spirit? The death of our Lord on the cross and decent into hell reveals a conspiracy of love of a Triune God that passionately desires to save all. Tonight we recognize that Jesus did not save us through a display of power. Jesus saved us by giving up his power. What does this mean for you and me?

When they pierced Jesus' side, water and blood came forth and the Church is born. These waters gave birth to the waters of baptism and the blood that came forth gave birth to the real presence in the Eucharist. Just as in Genesis, Eve was created from the side of Adam, in the Gospel of John tonight the Church is born from the side of Christ, his beloved bride. Just in Genesis, our failure consisted of a defiant will to power by grasping at the fruit of the forbidden tree. Tonight, salvation comes to us from another tree, a tree of total abandonment. Far from being a tree of death, the cross is the tree of life.

Christians, we will soon behold the wood of the cross. We will be invited to come forward and touch the tree of life. Last night, I asked the question how does Jesus save us. Tonight the answer is the cross. What this means in the spiritual life is, if we want to ascend the mountain of the Lord, we must paradoxically learn to descend. Like St. Therese of Lisieux once said provocatively, “you wish to scale a mountain but the good God wants you to descend; he is waiting for you at the bottom of the fertile valley of humility.” St. Catherine of Sienna wrote, “If we really want to see the stars of his mysteries, let us go down to the depths of true humility. When we are men and women of faith we do this, throwing ourselves on the ground in search of lowliness. Then God raises us up really high”. It took a whole lifetime before St. Augustine understood this. As he writes in his confessions, “Late, late, have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient and ever new! You were within me, and I was in the world outside myself. I searched for you outside myself and, disfigured as I was, I fell upon the lovely things of your creation. You were with me, but I was not with you... You called me; you cried aloud to me; you

broke my barrier of deafness...I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and now I burn for your peace.”

And so, we come tonight hungry and thirsty for God and discover that Jesus is hungry and thirsty for us. Tonight on the cross, Jesus says, “I thirst”. This calls to mind not only his thirst for the faith of woman at the well, but Jesus’ thirst for you, for me and for the whole world. Jesus thirsts for our salvation. He knows we cannot save ourselves and so tonight he humbly shows us the way. The path to heaven cannot be made by foot, you see. It must be made on our knees with Christ our Lord. Amen.