

Holy Thursday “God Washes our Feet”

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On Holy Thursday, God incarnate knelt down in the dust and washed our feet. Let that sink in. It is all too easy to miss the significance of this mind bending event. God almighty knelt down in the dust to wash our feet. That is what the Gospel tells us.

It might be helpful to recall that foot washing was a sign of extreme hospitality in antiquity. Many houses wouldn't have offered this courtesy. Even servants weren't typically expected to wash feet. When you entered a home that did provide this courtesy, it was of course a servant who did the washing not the master of the house. This is what makes this Gospel reading so jarring. By washing the disciple's feet, Jesus sets a provocative precedent. If you think about who God is and who we are, if anyone is going to wash feet we would expect human beings would be washing God's feet. God turns this all around. God is now the one who washes His creatures' feet.

By doing this, Jesus commands Peter and the disciples that ministry is about *diakonos*, service, and the new priesthood is born. When our lives are focused on service, our souls flourish. When our lives are not grounded in service, our souls corrupt. And this message is an important one for us all, for priests, deacons, bishops, yes, but also parents, children, siblings, co-workers, employers, and even communities. A year ago, when the pandemic hit, all the shelves went empty as people fended for themselves. What would the world look like if we all washed each other's feet? However, there is something even more wonderful going on in tonight's readings...

My friends, all the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, have accounts of the Last Supper the night before Jesus was crucified. Only in the Gospel of John do we have the account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet prior to the Last Supper. It is a moment so central to the Eucharist that we have an image of this scene on our altar. Indeed, the spectacle of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples provides us a powerful glimpse into the inner life of God, the power of Eucharist and the power of the cross.

In our first reading from the book of Exodus, we recall Moses and Aaron being commanded to have each family procure a lamb, slaughter it, and pour its blood on the door posts so that when the Spirit of the Lord executes judgment by striking down every firstborn of the land, the Spirit of the Lord will pass over the houses marked with the lamb's blood, thus the origin of the Jewish feast of Passover. In the opening chapters of the Gospel of St. John, St. John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

At the Last Supper, a Passover supper, Holy Thursday, tonight, we have an interesting development: God himself in the person of Jesus Christ becomes the Lamb of God to be sacrificed for the atonement of our sins. As St. Paul recalls for us in our second reading from Corinthians, “Brothers and sisters: I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”

The Passover meal of Exodus is forever changed. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. No longer would human beings need to procure a lamb for the atonement of sins. God wants to be our Passover Lamb. No longer would human beings have to shed blood for the remission of sins, God wants his blood to be shed for our sins. No longer would we have to ritualistically feed God with blood and burnt offerings. God now wants to feed us with his body and blood. The Holy Eucharist is born on this holy night.

At the Last Supper, my friends, God turns the tables. God incarnate serves us by kneeling down in the dust to wash our feet. God incarnate feeds us lovingly with his own body and blood. God incarnate sacrifices himself for us on the cross. Why does God do all of this? Why? He does this because our almighty and omnipotent Creator loves us and...we cannot save ourselves. Only God can save us and God leads by example, showing us the way.

For centuries, the Church has included the foot washing as part of our Holy Thursday service to model Jesus’ example. We cannot do this tonight because of the need for physical distancing. However, what is the insight here? What if a billion Catholics around the world started washing peoples’ feet? Think about that for a moment. Do you think this might have an impact on the world in which we live? How would this effect life at home, at work or at school or our politics?

This evening, the Church wants us to understand the Eucharist in the light of Jesus washing our feet. We will celebrate the Last Supper this evening like the disciples did nearly two thousand years ago. And then, so to become our Paschal Lamb, Jesus will accept our betrayal and will be ripped away from us as we will scatter into the dark, not understanding the significance of this night. We will be confused about what will happen next as the Holy Triduum, the drama of our salvation, continues tomorrow evening at Golgotha.