

Homily
Holy Thursday
April 14, 2022

Tonight we begin the Sacred Triduum, the sacred three days that draw us into the great mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. To put it simply, we're entering into the events of our salvation. And on this Holy Thursday night, the liturgy takes us back to a night long ago in the Upper Room of Jerusalem. Let us think back to that night. So much had already happened. Jesus had taught great crowds a new law of love and gathered a group of followers. He had healed and restored life to many. He had come into conflict with the religious leaders, and now he was ready to complete what his Father sent him to do. The apostles probably didn't realize it, but this would be their last meal with Jesus before their world would turn upside down.

It was Passover, and that in itself was important. Jesus and the Twelve were recalling that solemn vigil when the people of Israel awaited their liberation from Egypt. Through the sacrifice of a lamb and the lamb's blood on their doors, the people of Israel were saved from slavery to the Egyptians. But at this Passover meal in the Upper Room, Jesus would give an entirely new meaning to these events.

During the meal, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to his disciples. "Take this and eat it, he said, "this is my body." Then he took the cup of wine, gave thanks, and gave it to them. "All of you must drink from it, for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out in behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins." The liberation of Israel from Egypt was just a foreshadowing of what Jesus now would do. In his own body and blood, he would save his people from the slavery of sin and death, and in the Eucharist, he anticipates this sacrifice. Jesus was already looking towards the cross, and in the Eucharist, he perpetuates what he would do on the cross the very next day. He makes forever present to his people the sacrifice of his own body and blood, and allows all of us to partake of that sacrifice just as the apostles did. And why would he do this? Why does he give himself to us in this way? So that we might be one with him in body and soul, in perfect communion. And from that night onwards, right down to our own time, history testifies that the Church has never failed to come together to offer the Eucharist. It is essential to who we are as the Church, because it is the sacrifice of Christ himself.

Tonight we are in that Upper Room with Jesus, and we can't help but be amazed at what he is doing. The word Eucharist literally means "thanksgiving," so on this holy night we pray especially in thanksgiving for God's great love for us, a gift that he renews directly and personally in the Eucharist. For the Eucharist is nothing but the Real Presence of Christ among us, given to us as a pledge of our salvation. In every Mass, whether in the humblest chapel or in the greatest cathedral, that sacrifice is renewed and made present to us again. In the Mass, we participate in the supreme act of love, the reconciliation of divinity and humanity, and we eat the sacrificed body and drink the poured out blood of the Lamb of God. At the Jewish Passover, a lamb was sacrificed and the blood splashed on the doorposts. The blood of the lamb over the door saved the family within from death. But in the Eucharist that we celebrate, the true Lamb of God is offered to the Father, and the body and blood of the Lamb which we receive brings us the promise of eternal salvation.

Jesus also gives an active role in this sacrifice to his apostles when he says, “Do this in memory of me.” Through the sacrifice of the Eucharist, he constitutes them as a new priesthood, a priesthood for a new covenant established in his own blood. Through the ordained priesthood, through the priests that Jesus himself calls, this supreme gift of love is passed along to God’s people. And without the priesthood, without these ordained men linked directly to the Upper Room, the Eucharist would not be. It was to the Apostles and their successors in the priesthood that Jesus said, “Do this in memory of me.” And since that night, the priests of Jesus Christ have not failed to offer his sacrifice at the altar, the sacrifice of perfect love.

And, of course, there is the poignant account in the Gospel of Jesus washing the feet of his companions. This action of Jesus was startling to the apostles. Washing feet was the humble work of a servant, even a slave, and Jesus was their master. They even called him Lord. Peter put up a fuss and didn’t want to go along with this. It seemed so out of place. But Jesus insisted, and made clear to them what he was doing. He was teaching them by example that they too must wash the feet of others. In other words, they were to become humble servants. “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” They must be willing to lower themselves just as he did, and in fact we all must be willing to wash the feet of others. We might wonder why John would mention this act specifically in his account of the Last Supper. And why does the Church give us this Gospel at this Mass? Jesus was demonstrating by his own actions that his new commandment of love is one with the sacrifice that he would offer. The same love that would be visible on the cross and that is received in the Eucharist is also to be found in our humble service toward others. Just as we receive his love in the Eucharist, we must give love to all those around us.

So let us go back to that Upper Room, and let us enter once more into the mysteries of love that Jesus reveals to us. Let us do this in remembrance of him.