Holy Thursday 2017

We have begun the Paschal Triduum. Tonight Jesus invites us to join him at the last supper.

But first a brief word about what we are doing. When we celebrate these three Holy Days, we aren’t doing a historical re-enactment of Jesus’ last three days in Jerusalem, as interesting as that might be. That’s an important point. This is much different than reenacting the past. Historical reenactment can be a great way to learn about history. But when folks reenact Civil War battles, they are pretty clear. People play different parts, but the goal is NOT to turn into a Confederate or a Union soldier. When the reenactment is done, you go back to being who you were before.

I hope and pray that is NOT what happens here. I sure don’t want to be the same as I was before this Lent, or before Holy Week began. That would be very sad.

What we are doing is rather remembering in a very special way. We are liturgically, spiritually, in prayer remembering, being present to the mysteries we are celebrating. Our goal is not to review history. It is to listen to the story, enter into the story, and discover this is OUR story. This is how we become disciples. And that is just the half of it. At the deepest level, we are invited to take it even further. Just as the disciples were, so we are, with them, called to become the Body of Christ. That is what it is to be church. To become Christ’s Body present in the world today. In instituting the Eucharist, and the priesthood, Jesus established the way in which He is ever present in the world: through the Eucharist, through his priests, through the community he calls to be his body.

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Tonight, it is through John’s Gospel that we are invited into the Paschal mystery. John wants us to be in an upper room with Jesus.

What was Jesus up to?

What did or didn’t Peter and the others understand?

What do we have trouble accepting?

Where would John like to lead us as he retells the story and invites us into it?

Given where I am right now, and where you are, where does Jesus want to lead us next?

So the story. It’s the last supper. Jerusalem is crowded – it’s Passover, so Jews from all over have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Holy Days. The population has swollen to three times the normal size. The Romans are on edge; big crowd, religious fervor, a bad mix; anything can happen.

Jesus and the disciples have found a place to share the meal. They’ve settled in. Remember, John told us that Jesus was fully aware that God had put everything in his power; that he had come from God, and was returning to God. He has a sense this will be the last supper. He can sense what the days ahead hold for him. But the disciples have no idea.
Jesus gets up, removes his outer garment, grabs a towel, a basin of water, and begins to wash the disciple’s feet. Is this really just a fine lesson on hospitality, humility and service? Having relived the event many times John knows it is much more.

Ordinarily, a host would provide water for guests at the entry way, to wash their feet when they arrived. Dirty, dusty streets. Vendors tossing their trash in the streets. Animals roaming the streets freely. Certainly no street cleaners to speak of. Folks wearing sandals. I get it. Washing your feet as you come into the house would be a very good thing. Not unlike when people take of their shoes and leave them at the door. Occasionally back then a slave might assist in washing someone’s feet, but only the lowest of slaves.

In this story, the disciples have already settled in, they didn’t just arrive. It’s long past the time for washing feet. What might that mean?

Just as Ezekiel performed unexpected, sometimes even shocking actions as a way of prophecy, and Jeremiah likewise performed prophetic actions, Jesus is following in that tradition.

He will be down on his knees again on Friday. He will be humiliated. Will empty himself for his disciples, and for all. The word for laying aside his outer garment is the same word John used when he wrote of the Good Shepherd laying down his life for the sheep.

The servile gesture of kneeling before each disciple to wash their feet, for those who know the story, foreshadows falling under the cross.

How could the disciples really understand?

They will one day, John tells us, but not at first.

How do we know it’s not just about washing feet? As I mentioned already, the timing, long after foot washing should have wrapped up is one clue. More importantly, how can Jesus tell Peter that without letting him do this, Peter will have no heritage with him? Peter’s feet aren’t the issue. It is allowing Christ to complete his mission, humbling himself, dying and rising that is essential, that is what will make Peter and the others clean. Being baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. This isn’t the first time Peter has had trouble with the idea that Jesus needs to suffer and die, and rise again.

We better understand Peter’s reaction when we remember that at this point, Peter is a disciple (that is, a learner), not an apostle (that is, one sent on a mission). Not only that, he and the others are still at the bottom of the learning curve. The Holy Spirit hasn’t been sent yet to help them understand everything.

Sure, they have heard Jesus tell parables. They have seen him perform signs, or miracles. They have prayed with him. But until after Jesus dies and rises from the dead, how can they possibly understand?

Peter still has to learn about self-emptying. He has to see that it is necessary for Jesus to die and rise if the power of sin is to be defeated, and death is to be conquered. Not only that, like many a learner, he has so much to learn about himself. He needs to discover how easy it is to say: “I’m
ready to lay my life down for you”, and how hard it is to grow strong enough to actually do it. He will, but long after this night.

I believe John wants us to take a serious look at Peter’s reluctance to having Jesus wash his feet.

We are reluctant to have anyone wash ours. We are reluctant to accept anyone being humble enough to kneel before us and serve us, much less our Lord and Master. And certainly accepting that Jesus must undergo the passion just for me is certainly a mystery that it takes time to grow into and embrace.

But for many of us, this is not our first time going to the upper room. It’s not our first Holy Thursday. John doesn’t want us to just identify with Peter at the bottom of the learning curve, he want us to move up the curve. We need to move from allowing Jesus to kneel before us, allowing our feet to be washed, accepting that he died for us, to giving this a try ourselves. Entering into humility and service, emptying ourselves of all pride. Ultimately dying to self for the sake of others: It’s the mystery even three days of full attention can’t completely exhaust.

To die to self is to truly live.

Jesus’ words are pretty clear. If I am ready to do this for you, you must do it for one another. The story is a powerful encouragement to let go of pride. Let go of focusing on ourselves. Look at the dirty feet, look at where ever humble service is needed, and step up to the plate. Not only has Jesus shown the way. He’ll help us find what we need inside to empty ourselves, to embrace humility, to find glory in serving, not being served. He is inviting us to find glory, and discover we can be side by side with him in doing the most mundane, humble tasks. Not only that, keep doing it, and he comes to live in us as we come to life in him!

If we really give this foot washing, humble, loving service thing a go, amazing things happen.

Through paschal mystery, we are led to the freedom only the forgiveness of sins can bring, and with Jesus, we pass beyond the power of death, rising to a new life.

So the last question I raised at the beginning: Where does Jesus want to lead us? Through the Gospel, through the foot washing, though the Eucharist we will shortly celebrate, Jesus wants to lead us back to our daily life. We don’t stay in the upper room, any more than Peter James and John could stay on the Mount of the Transfiguration. We are to go back to our daily life, and see the menial, mundane things we do in an entirely new light. Those menial tasks we may want to avoid could be just the place where the paschal mystery will suddenly unfold before us, where we will be invited to enter the paschal mystery, the place where we will encounter Jesus in a way that will lead us right to Easter, and the joy of the Gospel.