Holy Thursday 2018

We just heard from the book of Exodus the instructions for celebrating Passover, the oldest roots to what we do tonight. Exodus. The Passover. God delivering the people of Israel out of slavery, leading them to the Promised Land. Our Jewish brothers and sisters will be entering into this story tomorrow, as they begin their High Holy Days.

At the heart of the celebration, the Lamb being sacrificed. Its blood, protecting the people. Its body, nourishing them for the journey they are about to make, just as the blood of Christ protects us, and his body nourishes us on our journey.

Next we sang a psalm about taking up the cup of life. How do we respond to Christ leading us out of slavery? We take thee cup of life and call God’s name.

Then we heard the oldest account of the words we use to celebrate the Eucharist, words of Jesus. Words handed on to St. Paul, words he handed on to the Corinthians, and they to us. Powerful words. Words that hold the power of God to create, to bring to life, to transform.

So one might expect that as we enter the Triduum, our high holy days, when we solemnly celebrate the Institution of the Holy Eucharist, and of the Priesthood, we would hear from one of the Synoptic (seeing together) Gospels recounting how, at the Passover meal, Jesus took bread, blessed, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. Then he took the cup of wine, said the blessing, and gave the cup to his disciples, saying this is my blood, the blood of the new covenant.

But instead, we hear from the Gospel of John. No institution narrative. It isn’t the Passover, but the night before. And then, of all things, John tells us how Jesus lays aside his outer garment, ties a towel around his waist, kneels before his disciples like a lowly slave, and washes their feet.

Was this way out of the ordinary? You bet! John captured well how uncomfortable this made Peter, and probably all the disciples. No master kneels before his disciples to wash their feet! Besides, dinner was already underway. Foot washing was meant for when you entered the house. No wonder Peter initially would have none of it, and then overreacted: wash my head and hands as well.
So why would John tell us about this action at the last supper, rather than the traditional words and actions we just heard from St. Paul, and that we find in each of the other Gospels?

Who can know for sure? But we do know that during times of intense persecution, when Jesus’ followers were being martyred, connecting Jesus laying down his life to martyr’s blood being poured out was a very reassuring message. Something those who lost friends and family, those in danger of being next to be martyred needed to hear.

But with decades more time to reflect on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, John would have had plenty of time to see more clearly how dying to self is not just a last act, it is a message about loving in everyday life. John is always taking the wider, deeper view. Jesus’ passion and death were not one grand, heroic, but isolated event. This was the culmination of a life poured out for others.

It brought to completion his teaching the beatitudes, and then living them.

His teaching forgiveness and mercy, and then living it.

His awareness that only forgiveness can conquer sin and evil. Only by sacrificing his life could he conquer the power of sin and death.

Praying and reflecting on the mysteries, guided by the Holy Spirit, John could see how important humility is to understanding the life of Christ, and our life in Christ. Perhaps he could see more clearly that in day to day humility and service of others we learn to die to self and rise more Christ-like. John learned in a long life that in our relationships with others we find Christ, and we grow in Christ. The Priesthood, the Eucharist are ultimately about sacrificial love, loving, truly loving, solely for the sake of those we love. Loving in this way is the everyday call for each one of us. Humbly washing feet is not a bad way to capture that day to day aspect of following Christ.

Ask someone who has been married for 50 years, can you succeed without the Lord’s help? Without God’s grace, how can you stop the human tendency to put ourselves first? It is grace that makes it possible to truly prioritize our life for the good of the other.

Ask a son or daughter caring for an elderly parent with Alzheimer’s. They know the journey of dying to self, while experiencing transformation.
Ask a parent of a teen, or a teen trying to be himself or herself, while loving and respecting his or her parents.

Ask anyone truly trying to live a Christian life. It can’t be done without dying and rising, becoming a new creation.

Jesus invites us to enter into a Eucharistic life by laying aside our pride, our ego, our human, self-centered ways, taking up a humble position with respect to others, like on our knees washing feet, and serving --- following the model Jesus gives in our Gospel today. Foot washing offers the model, symbolically. It is in the 364 other days of the year that we are called to follow the model, to walk with Christ, and to let him begin to live in us through our simple, humble, self-emptying acts of love. Feeding someone who can’t feed themselves. Changing diapers. Being patient with mood swings. Household chores. The routine of earning a living and supporting a family.

By the way, John uses the same word for Jesus laying aside his outer garment that he used for the good shepherd laying down his life for the sheep. I doubt that was by accident! Laying aside our pride, our ego, laying down our life for others – it goes against the grain, we have to do it over and over, until the memory of loving in this way is embedded in our very muscles. Muscle memory.

Only over time will it become so much a part of who we are that at the end, dying to self and rising to love with the heart of Jesus can be the culmination of a life following Jesus, the day when we lay down our life for the last time, ready to take up that ultimate resurrected life with Jesus.

I am glad we have four evangelists, plus Saint Paul, each offering their particular insight into the Last Supper, and our Eucharist. That three of the Gospel writers are quite similar, and that John offers a more unique insight is also a blessing.

I thank God today that John saw how significant Jesus washing his disciples feet truly was, and that he chose to put that prophetic action center stage.

There is something about getting down and washing feet that does open our eyes, our hearts, and brings us closer to Jesus, and to others.

There is something about getting down and washing feet that keeps pride out of this great sacrament, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of Priesthood, Holy Orders.

There is something about getting down and washing feet that can make us truly humble enough to forgive those who hurt us.
He washed the feet of his betrayer, the one who denied him, and the others who abandoned him.

Who would every guess that such a simple gesture could break through the walls we build to protect ourselves, and open our hearts in humility to others? Or that it can lead us to a closer communion with the one who, this past Sunday, entered Jerusalem humbly on a colt, the foal of an ass? Yet it can. So John brought to the fore this action as a prelude to the institution of the Eucharist.