

Holy Thursday 2014

The Gap between Belief and Action

Whenever I preach, I am conscious of my unworthiness, for the words that I preach are not my own. No, they are words of Christ and thus reflect a matchless degree of holiness. The same is true for anyone who bears witness to Christ; if our testimony to Christ is honest, it must include our ongoing need for conversion. Conscientious parents also understand this. It is one thing for us to point out to young people what is right and good and quite another thing always to choose what is right and good ourselves. What about supervisors and managers? It's their duty to hold their co-workers to a high standard. But honest supervisors know that they too sometimes miss the mark.

In our fallen humanity there is a gap between what we say and what we do, between the ideals and values we hold to be important and the way we lead our lives. Some people are aware of this but do nothing about it; others try to narrow the gap and succeed only to one degree or another; still others seem unaware that their ideals and behaviors are mismatched. Falling short of one's ideals and values is so much a part of daily life that we are truly delighted when we meet people who practice what they preach.

The Word of Jesus

With that in mind, let us enter into the world of the Twelve Apostles whom we meet on this Holy Thursday evening in the Upper Room. The Apostles came of age at a time when the Scribes and Pharisees held sway. As you recall, Jesus often accused the Scribes and Pharisees of hypocrisy. Scripture portrays a big gap between what they taught and how they lived. On the whole, they were smug, self-righteous, and pretentious.

By contrast, Jesus entered the scene as one who taught with authority. Many found Jesus' words to be authentic and they were attracted to him because they sensed there was no gap between who Jesus was and what he said. When he said "Blessed are the poor in spirit, the Kingdom of God is theirs", Jesus stood before them as "the Son of Man who [had] nowhere to lay his head". When he said that the humble will be exalted, Jesus was in their midst "as one who came not to be served but to serve, to give his life as a ransom for many". There was absolute identification between who Jesus was and what he taught: Jesus did not merely teach the Word of God; He was and is the Word made flesh.

he Lord's closest followers were continually astonished by all of this. We see it tonight as Jesus kneels down to wash the feet of his disciples. Before a group who had argued among themselves about who was most important, Jesus stooped to wash their feet and dried them with a towel. He did what slaves usually did: he washed life's grime and filth from their feet.

Peter was appalled, of course, but Jesus would have none of it, because, kneeling there, he wasn't putting on an act. Jesus wasn't pretending to be humble or staging a morality play. Kneeling there, washing their feet, drying them: that is who He is and who God is. Jesus' humility was not a human guise that the Son of God donned to hide his divinity. Rather Jesus' way of living, his words and his deeds, especially his death on the Cross reveal what St. Bonaventure called "the humility of God" - a God who was not content to live in solitary splendor but who poured out his love upon us his creatures and sought our love in return. It is a self-giving love that prompts God to stoop down, to pursue us in spite of rejection, to share our life, our poverty, and our death, so that we might share in his eternal life and glory. Kneeling there, Jesus revealed God's humble love for sinful humanity.

At the Table with Christ and the Apostles

Reclining at table, Jesus went further. With the story of the first Passover in their

hearts and on their lips, Jesus and his Apostles re-lived the drama of Israel's escape from the slavery of Egypt and from that death inflicted by the avenging angel. This happened through the sacrifice of the paschal lamb & the sprinkling of its blood. Renewing this irrevocable sign of God's love, Jesus brought it to fulfillment. Taking bread, he offered thanks, and gave it to the Apostles saying, "This is my body that is for you!" So too with the wine: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood!"

During the Last Supper Jesus was revealed as the true paschal lamb who would freely give himself in sacrifice for the salvation of the world, whose blood would bring about deliverance from sin and death. Thus did Jesus bring about the new & eternal covenant between God & his People:

The bread and wine which Jesus gave the Apostles was not bread and wine at all; rather, it was Himself - it contained his identity as the Son of God made man; it embraced his saving words and deeds with their radical newness; it anticipated the death and resurrection he was about to undergo. Jesus did not hand his disciples "a thing" but rather his very self: he offered his Body and poured out his Blood, his Soul, his Divinity. Under the appearances of bread and wine, the Eucharist encapsulates the totality of Jesus' self-giving love and reveals the ultimate origin of this love.

Go and Do Likewise

During the Supper, Jesus added these words: "Do this in memory of me". With these simple words, Jesus institute the Most Holy Eucharist the banquet of his sacrifice to be celebrated until the end of time.

Jesus did so because he wills to draw us all into his self-giving love. In the Mass we share in the sacrifice of the Cross; we share in Christ's self-giving love; we are drawn into the reality of being loved by God so we may love others in return. This is how we become equipped and committed to live the same charity that is so evident

in all that Christ said and did. This is the food which, if we receive it worthily, transforms us inwardly, strengthens us against the onslaught of sin and temptation, makes us credible witnesses to Jesus and to the Gospel before unbelievers, and sends us forth in loving service to our neighbor. From the Eucharist we derive the love to kneel and wash the feet of those in need.

The more devoutly we participate in Holy Mass & receive the Blessed Eucharist; and the more time we spend praying before the Blessed Sacrament reserved, the narrower will be the gap between our daily lives and our identity as Christians and between the way we live and the faith we profess. By receiving Our Lord and by spending time with him in prayer, we absorb his love. His love is woven into the fabric of our lives: our homes, our work, our relationships.

Sharing in Christ's Self-Giving Love through the Priesthood Finally, our hearts are filled with gratitude for another gift Jesus gave us this night. During the Last Supper, he instituted the ordained priesthood, again with the simple words, "Do this in memory of me!" Jesus did this so as to remain with us, to continue his sacrifice of love for all time.

Your priests have been called and sacramentally ordained as the Lord's instruments to draw us into the one sacrifice of Jesus that takes away the sins of the world. Through Holy Orders, priests speak and act in the very Person of Christ. They utter the words, "This is my Body" and "This is my Blood" in the name and in the Person of Jesus Christ, Head and Shepherd of the Church.

Thus it is especially important that we, your priests, live the mystery we celebrate, that the gap be narrowed between our priestly identity and our manner of life. How important that we be credible witnesses to the love we sacramentally re-present. So on this night when Christ instituted the Mass & the priesthood in the same breath, I invite you to pray for your priests, to thank them for their ministry, and to pray

intently for an increase of priestly vocations in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

On this holy night I also ask that you pray earnestly that through our devotion, sincerity and holiness of life people all around us throughout the Archdiocese will rediscover the beauty and truth of the Eucharist, so much so, that they will never again want to absent themselves from Mass on Sunday. May Christ's Eucharistic love fill our hearts and transform us into images of his glory. God bless us and keep us always in his love!