

Holy Thursday 2015

Introduction

We have gathered for the Mass of the Lord's Supper, our evening sacrifice of praise. Even in the magnitude of this Cathedral Church, we find ourselves sharing in the intimacy of the Upper Room where Jesus celebrated the Passover with the Apostles.

We share in this intimacy not only because we read about it or imagine it. Rather, in and through the liturgy the events of that night before Jesus died come alive for us in a way that is both very real and deeply spiritual. It is as if we are sitting at table with the Lord and his closest followers.

What, then, does Jesus impart not only the Apostles but also to us? Three things stand out, three points for us to ponder and take to heart: Discipleship; Eucharist, and Priesthood, allow me a word about each of these.

Discipleship

In the Gospel just proclaimed, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. He knows that Judas Iscariot will betray him and that he will soon lay down his life for the salvation of the world. For some three years, Jesus had taught his disciples about the reign of God but on this, the night before he died, he gave them an unforgettable lesson. He who is Master, Teacher, and Lord, kneels before his Apostles and washes their feet. Peter protests, of course, that Jesus had turned the world upside down. But the Lord is not deterred. Jesus, meek and humble of heart, gave them and is giving us a lesson in discipleship: "I have given you a model to follow," Jesus said, "so that as I have done for you, you should also do."

On this night of our deliverance, the Lord's words must resonate in our hearts. Jesus came "not to be served but to serve, to give his life as a ransom for the many." Jesus taught us that "the last shall be first and first shall be last" and reminded us that 'those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who are humble shall be exalted.' He told us we cannot enter the Kingdom of God 'unless we become like little children' and pointed out to us the value of the humble gift of the poor widow. Now he demonstrates his teaching by washing the feet of his disciples.

"The world," Pope Francis said, "tells us to seek success, power and money. God tells us to seek humility, service, and love." So as I kneel to wash feet this evening, we must all ask ourselves: Are we really willing to serve, to help others...especially the poor? Are we ready to become like Jesus, meek and humble of heart? Only a heart such as that can appreciate what Jesus is about to do for us.

Eucharist

And what Jesus does next is to return to the table and institutes the Eucharist. He does this on the night when the Chosen People commemorated their deliverance from the slavery Egypt by the power of God's mercy. On the Cross, Jesus will bring to fulfillment the first Passover by undergoing the final and definitive Passover. Taking upon himself the sins of the world, he will pass from the death of sin to the new life of the Resurrection. He will open the way for you and me to pass from sin to grace and from grace to glory.

What Jesus would do on the Cross, he encapsulated in the Eucharist. In one of the earliest passages in the New Testament, St. Paul tells us what happened: "On the night he was handed over, [he] 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.'" Here we recognize words that are the heart of every Mass in which the death and resurrection of Jesus is reenacted for the sake of our salvation. Here we gave thanks to the Lord, who laid down his life for us and now draws so close to us that he becomes our spiritual nourishment. Let us experience what Pope Benedict termed, "Eucharistic amazement," as we receive the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And what should we pray for? This night as we keep vigil before our Eucharistic Lord, I might suggest that we ask for the grace of 'Eucharistic consistency' that is to say the grace of leading lives that are formed and shaped by the gift of the Eucharist. We should ask that our thoughts, words, and deeds align with what we believe and with the gift of love that we receive Sunday after Sunday and even every day. Indeed, Jesus gave us the Eucharist so that we could truly be his disciples. In a phrase, we must become what we receive.

The Priesthood

There is a final point for us to reflect on this evening, the ordained priesthood. Last Monday evening, this Cathedral Church was filled with clergy and faithful from all parts of the Archdiocese of Baltimore for the Blessing of the Holy Oils. In that Mass, the priests who serve in the Archdiocese renewed the promises that they made on the day of their ordination.

They did so in anticipation of this night when the Lord instituted the priesthood by commanding his disciples, "Do this in remembrance of me." Out of love for us, Jesus empowered the disciples and their successors to continue the One Sacrifice that brings salvation to the whole world. This night we again thank the priests who have responded to the Lord's call, we express our prayerful and loving support for our seminarians, and we pray that God will bless the Archdiocese of Baltimore, with a new abundance of priestly vocations.

Conclusion

As the liturgy proceeds, the joy and intimacy of the Upper Room is overshadowed by the impending hour when Jesus, already betrayed, will lay down his life for us. This night we will follow Jesus into the Garden of Gethsemane and do our best to stay spiritual alert as the Lord takes upon himself our sins. Let us resolve to walk the way of the Cross, to stand beneath the Cross, so that we may share in the Lord's blessed Resurrection. May God bless us and keep us always in His love.