

Holy Thursday – April 13, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 7pm Mass w/ Washing of the Feet – 1,500 words

Our gospel this evening takes place just before the Last Supper, where Christ instituted not only the ministerial priesthood but also the sacrament of his body and blood, the Most Holy Eucharist. And St. John, as he often does, gives us details about those moments that the other gospel writers do not share – specifically, we hear about the washing of the feet. In a short while, we will reenact that ritual here in the Cathedral church, as we do each year. And it is important that we understand not only its original and immediate meaning for the disciples who were gathered with Jesus, but also its meaning for us today.

To begin, we must recognize that the only people present with the Lord were in fact his twelve disciples. Of course, he had many other followers, both male and female; among the women, think, for example, of his good friends, Martha and Mary. But neither those women nor any other men are present. It's only the Twelve – those whom he had chosen to be the pillars of his Church. Twelve men upon whom, as we heard in the gospel of Matthew, he had conferred authority to act and speak in his name, to “bind” and to “loose”. So it seems that this supper had to do in a particular way with the business of the Church, and was not merely a goodbye meal among friends.

St. John tells us that as the meal was about to begin, “Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father”: the suffering and death that he had predicted on several occasions to his disciples was about to take place. He would offer his body and blood in atonement for our sins. And as we know from the other three gospels, he would, during the Last Supper, give his body and blood in the form of bread and wine to his disciples, and command them to do the same in memory of him. So now there begins to emerge a fuller picture of what is taking place here: something “priestly” is happening. It has to do with sacrifice. And it has to do with Christ's giving the power to his chosen followers to make his sacrifice present.

This is where we can start to understand what the washing of the feet meant then. It says that Jesus removed his outer garment, put a towel around his waist, and proceeded to wash their feet. Peter is surprised and he exclaims, “Lord, you will never wash my feet!” But the Lord warns him in reply: “Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me”. These are important and weighty words. They point us back – back to the Old Testament, and back to its ministerial priesthood.

We know that in the Old Testament, Israel was divided into twelve tribes. And one of them – the Tribe of Levi – was the priestly tribe. The other eleven tribes each were given a portion of land, so that they could have political security and raise up their families in the honor of God. But the priestly tribe did not receive a special portion of land; no, their portion, or “inheritance”, was to be God himself. In other words, they were not to be focused on the security that this world offers, but rather live totally for God; he was to be their principal possession and their security – their rock. Therefore, when Christ says to Peter, “Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me”, he is saying that he means to give himself to Peter as his special inheritance. He is using priestly language. He is talking about making Peter, and the other eleven disciples, his priests.

But there is another fact from the Old Testament that confirms what is taking place. And keep in mind that the Twelve were practicing Jews. So it started to “click” for them: after Christ used the language about having an “inheritance” with him, they knew he was talking about the priesthood. Thus they would have also recalled the fact that priests had to wash before they approached the altar. It was a requirement: any priest who went to offer sacrifice in the ancient Temple without having performed the ritual cleansing would have been guilty of sacrilege. By washing their feet, Christ is making them worthy to serve at the altar in the new Temple, his holy

Church, where they will not offer bulls and goats in sacrifice, but will rather make present the sacrifice of Christ himself, who would later in that same meal say to them, “Do this in memory of me”.

The original and immediate meaning of the washing of the feet, then, was the institution of Christ’s new priesthood. The disciples then perpetuated that priesthood by consecrating other chosen men and so handing down the sacrament of Holy Orders since that time, for Jesus instructed them to do so by saying: “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do”. He was ordaining them as priests, and he wanted them to perpetuate his gift through time until his Second Coming. We pray in a special way this evening for the young men in our midst whom God has chosen also for future service as priests; we pray that they may hear his call and respond with all their heart. May the Lord grant us many good and holy priests!

The washing of the feet and the injunction to do likewise clearly was also an act of humble service and self-emptying on the part of our Lord. And from there we can find a wider meaning that applies to all of us here gathered as well. For by our baptism, we all share in Christ’s priesthood – what we know as the “priesthood of all believers”. As we hear in the first preface for Sunday Masses in Ordinary Time: we are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God’s] own possession”. Because of our baptism we are qualified to offer fitting worship and service to God, with all that it implies, including the service of our neighbor.

By washing the disciples’ feet immediately before instituting the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper, the Lord draws a connection for us between the Eucharist and service. If our participation in the Holy Eucharist does not lead us to a more profound charity, externalized through concrete acts of service to others – especially the poor – then our communion is not bearing the fruit it should. All of us here tonight – priests and people – must examine our consciences and ask how we are doing in fulfilling Christ’s mandate to serve. May this washing of the feet, which our Bishop will shortly celebrate, renew in us a lively awareness of our need to undertake concrete acts of loving service in order to imitate Christ and so be pleasing to God the Father.

Following the washing of the feet, our celebration will continue with the Holy Eucharist, about which we heard from St. Paul in the second reading. Paul relates what priests have been doing since the very beginning: “I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you”, he says – namely, “that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you....’ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood...’. The priest, in obedience to Christ’s command, makes Christ’s sacrifice present on the altar.

At Holy Mass, we all participate in that sacrifice in a sacramental way: Christ’s most holy body and blood really and truly become present in our midst, under the appearances of bread and wine. Those who are properly disposed – who are in the state of grace – may partake of the banquet. And after Mass, in a special way tonight, we may all spend some moments in adoration before the Most Blessed Sacrament, reserved on our beautiful altar of repose until midnight.

Priesthood, loving service, and Eucharist: these are the three realities we celebrate tonight, recalling how our Lord and Savior perfectly modeled them for us. I take this opportunity to thank you for your support of me and all priests, especially by your prayers; as well as for your support and fervent prayers for vocations. I thank you for the many ways that you serve the poor, as we are also challenged together not to rest on our laurels but to consider what more we must do as individuals and as a parish. And I thank you for your love of the Lord Jesus and the special love and reverence you reserve for his Real Presence in the Most Blessed Sacrament. O Sacrament most holy, O Sacrament divine: all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment thine!