

Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ (B)

(Exodus 24:3-8 / Mark 14:12-16,22-26)

3.06.2018

The other day I found myself sitting in a hospital waiting room with nothing else to do but wait. I thought I would make use of the moment afforded me to take look at today's Scripture readings. I took out a copy of *Living With Christ* – a handy to carry monthly lectionary – which I had slipped into my pocket before I left the monastery. As I began to read the gospel passage of today's Eucharist my attention stopped immediately at what might first appear to be a fairly insignificant little point in the story, but, when you consider the cultural context of the time, is a point which is actually quite extraordinary. I underlined these words as I read them: *a man carrying a jar of water*. (That's the American/Canadian lectionary translation used in *Living With Christ* that I'm quoting. What we heard proclaimed here in our English lectionary was *a man carrying a pitcher of water*.) I had just underlined those words when I got called to go to be beside the patient I had accompanied to the hospital. When I eventually got back to re-read today's gospel passage last evening I noticed the words I had underlined in my first reading of the text, but what struck me even more in this subsequent reading was the instruction Jesus gave His disciples in regard to the man carrying the pitcher of water: *Follow him*. I found myself underlining these words too.

A man walking around with a jar of water would have been a very unusual sight in Jerusalem in Jesus' day. To carry water from the spring or well was ordinarily a woman's task. Indeed, for a man to be seen carrying water in public would have been considered totally demeaning. There is an incident recorded for us in the Book of Joshua (chapter 9) which shows us how the task of *chopping wood and carrying water* was imposed as a punishment (a public humiliation) upon the Gibeonites because they had tricked and deceived Joshua.

Given the ambient Hebrew culture for any man to dare to be seen willingly carrying water – which seems to have been the case with the man the disciples encountered – would have demanded of that man two qualities: **humility and freedom**. I see both these qualities as closely linked. Humble people are free people and free people are humble people. Pride imprisons, humility frees.

I can think of only one category of man who would be willingly carrying a water jar in Jerusalem: a member of that group known as the Essenes. In Jewish tradition of the period these men carried their own water without embarrassment or shame. The Essenes were mostly male celibates which meant that they also had to do women's work to look after themselves. They did this without any vexation whatsoever. They were happy to do so. The Essenes were part of a quasi-monastic movement within Judaism. They lived in communities in different places – Qumran being among the most important Essene settlement. Evidently there was an Essene community in Jerusalem since we know there was Gate called *The Essene Gate*. Was it through this gate that the disciples entered the city? It may well have been. The disciples could well have gone to the Essene quarter of the city because this group were also known to practice generous hospitality. Remember, the disciples were sent to look for a room where they could celebrate the Paschal feast. They needed hospitality – something the Essenes freely offered.

Because I found myself intrigued by the idea of a man carrying water in Jerusalem and remembered how the Essene men would do this, I began a little more research into the Essenes late last evening. What I discovered confirmed me in my original intuition that this man has something to say to us about humility and freedom, for I was led to discover in a book extract I downloaded how Philo remarks that both the humility and inner freedom were characteristic of the Essenes. Philo names these attributes especially among the other qualities to be found among members of this group – alongside such things as hospitality which I've just mentioned.

So much for the man carrying the pitcher of water...

I'm pretty confident that something which is also really important and worth considering is what was in the jar: **water**.

Having thought of the carrier's humility and freedom, I also thought of the humility of the contents of the jar. Francis of Assisi's acclamation from the Canticle of Creation came to mind: *We praise You Lord for Sister Water, so useful, **humble**, precious and pure.*

The water the man was carrying would have been useful – needed for the preparation of the unleavened bread for the celebration of Passover. The water in the pitcher could also be hinting at something Mark doesn't actually recount in his Gospel story, but which John makes much of in his Gospel account. I'm thinking of Jesus' humble gesture accomplished during the meal He shared with His disciples. Water would have been needed for the disciples' foot washing at the Passover Supper.

Once again we need to think of the ambient culture to fully grasp what is made manifest by Jesus in the *Washing of the Feet*. What we are shown here is Christ's humility. Jesus well and truly set aside all He could have clung to by way of dignity to assume the condition of the lowliest of slaves. It was the lowest class of slaves who washed their Master's feet. Think about it... On the evening of His Passion the One whom His disciples and so many others referred to as *Master* stooped to wash His disciples' feet. Only a Master like Jesus – someone who was totally free in Himself and was genuinely humble – would ever have taken on such a lowly task.

By washing His disciples' feet – a gesture which He told His disciples that they must accomplish in each other's regard – what Jesus did was to follow the example of the woman of ill repute who washed His feet with her tears just days before. Jesus allowed Himself to be influenced by this fallen woman's display of humble love. He drew inspiration from it and followed her example. What humility!

Everything I have mentioned so far speaks to us in the same vein: the importance of us holding in our hearts attitudes of humble freedom and free humility. These attitudes should be hallmarks of our Christian living.

The notions of humble freedom and free humility are at the very heart of what we celebrate as we gather around the Lord's Table to celebrate the Sacred Mysteries. *Christ humbled Himself. Freely Christ gave His life for us. As He explained so clearly in John's Gospel account: Nobody takes My life from Me, I lay it down of My own free will.*

It is those same attitudes of heart which we see so beautifully exemplified by Jesus – humility and freedom – that we are called to hold in and allow to flow from our hearts.

Humble freedom and free humility are made manifest in a most wonderful way in the Eucharist. Frequently I find myself returning to lines from the late Henri Nouwen when it comes to recognising what the Sacred Mysteries we celebrate gathered around the Lord's Table are all about. Nouwen writes: *The Eucharist is the most ordinary and the most divine gesture imaginable. That is the truth of Jesus. So human and yet so divine; so familiar, yet so mysterious; so close, yet so revealing! But that is the story of Jesus who 'being in the form of God did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as humans are; and being in every way like a human being, He was humbler yet, even to accepting death on a cross. (Phil 2:18)*

When we gather at the Lord's table it is important for us to remember how Christ approaches His disciples – how He approaches us. Just as He did in regard to the Twelve at the Last Supper, so

Jesus kneels before us to gently bathe our feet, to tend to us in our wounded brokenness, to wash away the dust and even the dirt that can cling to us.

We are called to kneel before each other in our turn.

Christ wants us to have hearts which are inhabited by a humble freedom, with hearts free in humility... just like His.

At one point in the Gospel Jesus addresses these words to His listeners, to us: *Learn from Me. I am meek and humble of heart.* In the same context Jesus speaks of the call for us to take on His yoke. The yoke Jesus invites us to take on must be freely embraced. It will not be imposed. We are under no duress with Christ. The way He proposes must be freely chosen.

I think it fair to say that when Jesus told His disciples to follow the man whom they would see carrying the pitcher of water He was reminding them of something fundamental to their Christian discipleship. In some way I believe it fair to see Jesus' instruction to His disciples to follow that man as an extension – a natural progression, a follow-on, to their initial call to follow Jesus Himself. The order to follow the man carrying the jar of water was an echo of and in consonance with that call so often repeated by Jesus throughout the Gospel story – and even after the resurrection: *Follow me.*

I believe Jesus wants us, His disciples, to become as this man was: men and women of humble freedom, men and women free in humility, men and women who consider ourselves as nothing more than servants, men and women who present ourselves before others as such.

A true Christian will be like his or her Master, one who is unashamedly a servant and happy to be considered as such. A true Christian disciple will be able to make his or her own the words of the well-known hymn, *The Servant Song*:

*Will you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you?
Pray that I might have the grace to let you be my servant, too.*

Called to be *servants of each other* – servants of all our brothers and sisters in humanity – we are called to have the same respect and veneration in our hearts for each other as we are hold therein for the Sacrament of the Altar.

Significantly my meditation on the mystery of the Eucharist began in a Hospital Emergency Room. It began in a place where I was surrounded by men, women and children suffering in their bodies. Among those there the other day was one young man in a wheelchair holding a Teddy Bear and calling out to all who passed by. This young man evidently had special needs which had been there from his birth. It struck me to see how respectfully the nursing staff and others he beckoned to his side dealt with him. Even though the young man could not really speak – he just made inarticulate noises – each one of the medical staff he stopped in their tracks took a moment with him. This was all the more striking given that we were in a place where everyone was under such pressure. Their busyness and professionalism didn't hinder them from acknowledging and even honouring their weak and broken brother. What I saw heartened me. It heartened me at a time when many are feeling somewhat disheartened, as they contemplate the possibility that the gift of human life – especially the human lives of the most vulnerable in society – are increasingly under threat.

Let us not forget as we celebrate Eucharist that we are all called to tend to, venerate and care for the most vulnerable in society with a reverence equal to that which we give to the sacrament of the altar. That is how it should be! The bread we break at the Table of the Eucharist should draw us towards the most vulnerable; the wounded, the rejected, those hurting, the poor. Just as we reverently receive and handle the sacramental Body and Blood of Christ, so we should approach people in their brokenness and littleness, gently, so gently... with humility and respect. Amen!