

Holy Thursday

(Exodus 12:1-8.11-14 / 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 / John 13: 1-15)

24.03.2016

This evening we are all invited to allow Jesus to kneel before us to wash our feet. Let me hasten to add that whether or not we come forward for the liturgical re-enactment of Christ's foot-washing gesture is really immaterial. Interiorly, we are all invited to allow Jesus to minister to us ...

otherwise, we can have no part with Him – we have Jesus' own word for this.

To allow Jesus to wash our feet, to permit Him to show us His loving kindness in this way, is as important as responding to His invitation to take the bread He offers to eat it and to share the cup from which He invites us to drink.

I wonder how many of us are truly ready to allow the Lord to wash our feet this evening.

I suspect that many of us are more inclined to react like Peter and say: *Wash my feet? Lord, never.*

Many of us shy away from having the humility required of us to allow ourselves to be ministered to.

Many of us are much more comfortable around caring for other people and serving them, than we are around accepting to be cared for and lovingly served by others.

Why do we resist being cared for by others?

Could it be that we are afraid of not being in control?

There may well be an element of that in our reaction, but I am sure there is something else that also comes into play – and this perhaps more than we realise. I suspect the real issue for many of us is the fact that we are afraid of and shy away from allowing ourselves to be loved.

We find it well-nigh impossible to imagine just how much God loves us, just how much He shows us His love through other people who care for us and are there for us, willing and ready to show us their consideration – if only we would permit them to do so.

Many of us deprive ourselves from the well-being we hope and long for by our refusal to allow ourselves to be loved.

Isn't it strange that what we long for most in life, is what we are most inclined to shy away from?

Yes, we long for love, yet we shy away from allowing ourselves to be loved.

Why is this?

Because love makes us vulnerable.

When we truly feel loved, we feel really vulnerable.

Some people speak of love making them feel weak – yes, literally, making them feel weak at the knees.

Any of us who have ever experienced a strong emotion of love welling up within us will be able to identify with what has just been said. Any of us who have ever felt the depth of another's love for us will also be able to identify with it. Love weakens us, or maybe it would be truer and better to say that love softens our hearts.

Any of us who have ever felt truly loved will also be aware of how unworthy we are of the loving kindness shown to us.

These feelings of unworthiness are quite understandable in a way, since true love is always pure grace. It is never merited. It is always given over and beyond anything we may have done to earn it.

On this Holy Thursday evening, we are invited to think of just how much God loves us.

The Lord loves us over and beyond anything we could ever imagine and His love for each one of us is pure grace: it is a totally unmerited gift.

If we are ever to enter into the movement of God's love – by which I mean, if we are ever to reflect Christ's love for us, doing for others what He has done for us, then, we must begin by allowing Him

to wash our feet. Jesus says that we must do for others what He has done for us. All begins by receiving from the Lord what we are called upon to share, in turn, with others.

To follow Jesus' example and serve others, we must start by allowing Him to serve us. It is as we experience the healing grace of Christ's cleansing power in our lives – the life-restoring blessing that comes to us through our welcoming of His tender mercy and compassion – that we can reach out to others in our turn and minister to them.

If we are not ministered to by Christ, first of all, we simply cannot minister to others in His name. If we are to show mercy and compassion, then we must first have received these gifts for ourselves. If we are to be channels of Christ's healing grace, then we must have experienced His graciousness in our lives.

We simply cannot give to others what we have not first of all received.

The words of the Scriptures come to mind – I actually hear them ringing in my ears to a musical melody, for I recall a Scripture song that marked me much in my adolescence. The lyrics are taken from the prophet Isaiah: *Freely, freely, you have received, freely, freely, give.*

What Jesus says to Peter boils down to this: *Peter, you need to realise that only those who have been ministered to themselves can minister to others effectively. Only those who know their own need to be washed clean, healed, cared for, tended to in their woundedness can serve others in their turn. You must realise that to listen to other people's confessions, feel their pain, walk with them in tough times, stand by them in their suffering and distress, attend to them in their need, in some way you must have experienced for yourself what you strive to manifest to them as a reflection of God's love.*

One must have gone through the rough and tumble of life oneself and have encountered hardship along the way to be a credible minister of compassion for others.

Peter still hadn't grasped this at the moment where we meet the disciples in the *upper room* on the eve of Christ's passion. Indeed, even having had his feet washed by Jesus, even after Christ tried to explain to him the importance of the gesture He had posed in his regard, Peter still didn't *get it*. Otherwise, Peter would have been able to stand by Jesus in His hour of suffering and be there alongside the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross.

In contrast to Peter, the beloved disciple clearly got Christ's message.

What was it that made him stronger than Peter?

I believe it is the fact that he was humble enough to have allowed himself to be loved by Jesus. John was stronger than Peter simply because he unashamedly consented to the Master's love for him. It is for this reason that he is forever known as *the beloved disciple*.

Just think of John's simplicity of heart at the Last Supper when he gently inclined his head and delicately leaned on Jesus' breast to listen to the Master's loving heartbeat.

I suspect few of us would be ready to do such a thing in the sight of others.

Why?

Well, I believe it all comes back to our fear of love: our fear of showing love and our fear of welcoming the love shown to us by others.

And yet this is the way that Jesus Himself exemplified.

Jesus had already had done for Him what He did for His disciples: His feet had been washed by that woman who bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. His feet had also been anointed by Mary in the household of Bethany. Jesus was not afraid to welcome these – and so many other – gestures of love exhibited in His regard.

It required great strength of character on Jesus' behalf to allow Himself to be shown the love displayed to Him so openly in the sight of all when the notorious sinner knelt at His feet and showed her esteem and heartfelt reverence so tenderly. Christ was clearly not afraid of what others

would think or say. Their tut-tuts didn't frighten him.

In the same way it was only a strong man who would dare to shed tears as Jesus is said to have done in the sight of all at the tomb of Lazarus. We read: *Jesus wept*. Those tears were tears of love. The sigh that came forth from the depths of Jesus' being was nothing less than a heart pang of love.

Jesus was not afraid of what He felt and showing that He had feelings. He was not afraid of how others might react and how they might interpret His disarmed way of being.

Jesus simply, truly, fully loved.

This is what He calls upon all of us to do.

On this Holy Thursday evening, Jesus dares us to go as far as He went in showing His love for others. He invites us to give our lives out of love.

The words *do this in memory of me* which accompany both what we call the *Institution* (the words of the Eucharist with which we are so familiar) and the gesture of the washing of the feet, call upon us to nothing less than total, self-giving love. They remind us that Jesus' total self-giving love is not just an example, but a commandment. Love is to be displayed in acts of humble service. We recall Christ's teaching: *I give you a new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you.*

Serving at table and the washing others' feet were counted among the most menial of tasks. We could even say that they were considered to be somewhat debasing. And yet, these were precisely the things that Jesus asked of those whom He was preparing for ministries of leadership in the future Church. It was for the apostles' benefit, first of all, that Jesus posed the gestures of serving and foot-washing, accompanying His actions with the instruction that the apostles should do as He did in His memory – indeed, in His name.

The Son of Man came not as a proud master who demanded service from others, but as a humble servant who delighted in helping others. In stooping down to do the lowest of tasks (serving at table, washing feet), Jesus showed all His disciples – but the apostles, future leaders of the Church, first and foremost – that every true Christians, but *a fortiori* every Christian leader, is called to serve others.

In the light of how we see Jesus position Himself, daring to take the last place – that of the lowliest of servants – let us pray that we, together with the whole Church, may reflect the humble servant Christ in today's world.

I draw this reflection to a close by quoting for you words of yet another Scripture-based song which made a deep impression on me in my adolescence. I would say that this song encouraged me to choose a life of ministry. It is good to come back to it again this evening. The refrain of this Scripture-based song constitutes, at one and the same time, both a call and a promise. It has us sing: *Put on the apron of humility, serve your brother, wash his feet, then you will walk in the way of the Lord, refreshed, restored.*

I firmly believe that the renewal, restoration, refreshment of the Church – which is something for which we all surely long – will only come about to the extent that we all take to heart the Master's call to live lives of humble service. Yes, all Christians, but, to begin with, those called to leadership in our Christian communities are called to serve their brothers and sisters.

Can I conclude by asking you to pray with and for our community – and its special intention – that men may hear the Lord's call to what the Second Vatican Council refers to as *the humble and noble service* of the monastic life at the heart of the Church? Pray with us that men hear the Lord's call to give their lives out of love for Christ and His people in this monastery of the Holy Cross.

Amen!