

Thursday of the Lord's Supper  
(Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 / 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 / John 13:1-15)  
29.03.2018

This evening's celebration opened with the solemn welcoming of the Holy Oils which were consecrated at this morning's Chrism Mass in Newry cathedral. These Oils were placed upon the altar as a reminder to us that **as we gather to celebrate this Eucharist of the Lord's Supper we do so in communion with the Church Universal through our belonging to our local Church, here in the Diocese of Dromore.** Our communion with the Church is a grace to be celebrated. Like every grace, it carries with it a responsibility. Reminded as we are that *we are Church*, we should think about what this implies for our lives and what it entails of us. We are called upon to remember that as Church we are called to be the sacrament of Christ's presence in the world. Bearing this in mind, let us turn to the word of God which proposed for our meditation this evening, attentive to what the Lord has to say to us through the Sacred Scriptures, in the particular context in which we find ourselves as we celebrate the *Pascha* this year. **Our local Church has been plunged into a crisis situation all these past weeks.** We cannot but feel challenged by that, but we can and should also feel encouraged by the word of God which is spoken to us this evening. There is always this double aspect of the Scriptures' proclamation in Church: **the word of God is given to us both as a challenge and an encouragement** – not so much one after the other, as both together, at one and the same time.

It seems to me that one line in particular from this evening's **first reading from the Book of Exodus contains both challenge and encouragement** and so I will hone in on the verse that states: *This month is to be the first of all others for you, the first month of the year. A new beginning is heralded here: a new beginning which is dependent upon the Exodus event – which was, we should remember, a far from easy experience to live through for all involved.*

**Exodus** means: *Exit... Leave... Escape.* Those words are words of crisis. They tell us what Exodus is all about: **a new beginning which grew out of a crisis situation.**

We must remember where the Exodus story began. It began in slavery and oppression, pain and humiliation. The Exodus from Egypt was God's answer to His People's cries. The Lord led His People out of bondage to a new life.

The Exodus of Israel from Egypt is part of a much bigger and far wider deliverance story. Centuries later, one of Israel's descendants, Jesus the Messiah, God made man, gave His life to deliver the whole human race from sin. Tonight we are reminded that each one of us has entered into that story; each one of us can add a new chapter to it. At the Jewish Paschal Meal the participants do not simply recall that their ancestors came out of Egypt; they experience themselves to be delivered in the here and now of their lives as they keep the feast. As it is for those we call *our elder brothers and sisters* in the faith, when they celebrate the Passover Meal, so it should be for us as we celebrate the Lord's Supper in this Eucharist.

There is a strongly consoling message for us in the Exodus story. It is that deliverance starts from the painful slavery and humiliation of God's People. This means that for us who are greatly pained by the tragic news of recent weeks – and all the humiliation that we feel as a result of that – a new beginning is possible. A fresh start is heralded through God's word. We are being called to enter into that new beginning this evening. Just as God heard the cries of the helpless in Egypt – just as the Lord responded to their cries by raising up a *servant leader* who would lead them into a new place and a whole new way of being – so He can and will do the same for us. He is already at work in this sense in His wounded body which is our

Diocesan Church of Dromore. The challenge for us is to believe that; it is to embrace God's way of leading us into freedom – a way which passes through the pain and distress we are feeling right now.

**A very important call comes to us through this evening's second reading – Paul's account of the Institution of the Eucharist.** It is **to do in remembrance of Jesus what He has done for us.** What is that? It is **to give our lives.** Jesus said: *This is my body given up for you... This is the cup of my blood poured out for you... Do this in memory of me. Do this in memory of me* applies to the whole of Jesus' self-gift, not just His gestures with the bread He broke and the cup which he blessed. The Church in Dromore needs us, her members, to give our lives wholeheartedly, so that she may live the new life to which she is being called by the death experience which we are being led to traverse at this particular time. Beyond the confines of the Church, the world also stands in need of men and women who will dare to give their lives for others. The Church and the world need love – and so they need our self-giving: *There is no greater love than to give one's life.*

We may be inclined to consider Jesus' way of dying – living His death as *self-gift* for His friends – as something far beyond what is *normal* in human terms, and therefore far beyond us, but the words of the Institution of the Eucharist imply that this is how we should approach life. Both our living and our dying should be understood as ways of incarnating self-giving love. Just as in the Eucharist Jesus gives *all*, His everything, so we are called to give *our all, our everything.* In the same way as God holds nothing back in and through Christ-Jesus, but chooses rather to give His entire being to and for us in His Son, so that we might live, so we are also called to hold nothing back and to give our entire being to and for others in order that they might live fuller, better lives.

**A privileged way of living self-giving love is through humble service. This way is indicated to us in this evening's gospel passage** which is John's parallel to the story of the Institution of the Last Supper found in the Synoptic gospels. The words we find at the end of this evening's gospel passage, which recounts for us the story of **the washing of the feet** – *I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you* – are, in fact, an echo of the invitation Jesus gave at the Last Supper when He said to His disciples to *take the bread and eat it* (implying that they should present their lives as nourishment for others), and *take the cup and drink it* (implying that they should pour themselves out for others) in His memory.

In the simple gesture of the washing of the feet Jesus both reveals the face of God and shows us how to represent the Lord to others, as Church, in the exercise of humble service. That it was to those to whom He confided authority in the Church that Jesus first gave this example, asking a similar service of them in regard to their brothers and sisters, has something very important to say to us. It is made clear here that **service and leadership in the Church are to be lived in humility.** It makes clear that leadership is understood as and lived as service. Leadership among us is not to be as it is in the world. We have Jesus' word for this: *It is not to be among you as it is among the leaders of this world.*

Symbols are powerful. **When Jesus calls His disciples** – and that means each one of us among them – **to wash each other's feet, He is telling us to honour each other through humble service.** He is reminding us that *to serve is to love* and *to love is to serve.*

Just as the celebration of the Lord's Supper is a moment of intense communion through the body – a bodily way of being in communion with each other – so too concrete gestures of service are concrete ways of being in communion through the body. The washing of the feet can be the bathing of a loved one who is ill, the bathing of an infant or an elderly parent, it

might also be as banal as the washing of the dishes in a kitchen sink. The veneration of the Body of the Lord is to be lived not only by reverence towards the sacrament of the altar, but also through respect for others. In the film *Le Grand Silence*, 'Into Great Silence', there is a remarkable scene wherein we are given to see a young monk caring for the ailing body of an aged brother. This scene comes in the film right beside a moment where we are given one of the rare glimpses into the liturgical life of *La Grande Chartreuse* – the monastery where the film was shot. Whether or not he realised what he was doing, I believe the film-maker (Philip Groing) illustrates beautifully in the bringing together of these two scenes – the bathing of the brother and the celebration of the Eucharist – the connection which we should all make between the sacrament of the altar and the sacrament of our brothers or sisters... especially the weak and fragile.

**It is important for us to be reminded this evening where the bread we break in the sacrament of the altar which we celebrate should lead us: to the broken body of Christ.** Our participation in this Eucharist should lead us to hold upon our hearts in prayer this evening the many who are suffering real pain and genuine distress at this time in our Diocesan Church. It should draw us towards those who feel rejected, forgotten, ignored, hurt, poor and needy. It should lead us to want to minister to all who long for a sign of our loving consideration – Christ's compassion displayed through us.

**The bread we eat here and the cup we share should not only nourish us and quench our thirst, they should make us hungry to feed the starving and give to drink to the thirsty... to show love to those in need of it.**

If we truly live the sacrament we are celebrating here this evening, then we will find that our hearts broken open, out of love, and we will leave here with a renewed willingness to serve. Sometimes what is asked of us will involve pain and suffering – just as it required these things of Jesus. What we can be sure of is that it will demand of us that we make **the ultimate gift of love** which is **death to self for the life of others.**