

Holy Thursday – Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper
(Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 / 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 / John 13:1-15)
13.04.2017

When I read the texts for this evening's liturgy I found myself thinking back to a conversation I had many years ago with a Cistercian abbot – a monk who greatly marked my childhood. I was probably about eleven or twelve years of age at the time. We talked about Judas' presence at the Last Supper. The betrayer had participated in that meal. Judas was there when Jesus gave the bread to the Twelve saying *This is my body given for you*. Judas had dipped the bread into the cup with Jesus, that cup over which Jesus pronounced the words *Take and drink from this cup which is my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins*. What intrigued me as a child was the fact that we are told how *Jesus already knew that it was in the heart of Judas to betray Him*. Jesus knew this even as He shared the bread and wine with the Twelve.

All these years later, I dare to say that Judas' full participation in the meal is still worth pondering. It poses question. That said, I believe it is important that we go beyond simply satisfying ourselves to question the betrayer's state of mind and heart when he communed at that Last Supper. Is the real challenge not to examine what our own inner thoughts are when we participate in the celebration of the Eucharist? Furthermore, reflection upon Judas' participation at the Last Supper should surely stop us in our tracks when we begin to think that we have the right to determine, on our terms alone, who and who shouldn't receive communion when God's People gather to celebrate Eucharist.

Those who advocate a very strict Eucharistic discipline; those who go as far as to hold an intransigent position when it comes to discerning who should and who shouldn't be granted access to the Lord's Table need to be careful, for they can run grave risks when they exaggerate their position. Let's be clear. The Eucharist is not reserved only to those whom we might call *squeaky clean* people. It is the poor, the sick, the wounded who are invited to dare to respond to the Lord's invitation to come forward and receive the gift on offer when Christ invites them to His Table. Are not all those who advance to commune invited to say: *Lord I am not worthy?* There is no question of any of us saying: *Lord, I am worthy to receive you*. Even those of us who have made the best possible preparation for Holy Communion could ever dare to advance to the Lord's Table pronouncing words along the lines: *Lord, here I am perfectly in order to receive You*. And yet, there are people in our Churches who give the impression that participation in the Eucharist, Holy Communion, is some sort of *prize for the perfect*. One is left wondering if these folk – some of them eminent ecclesiastics – have ever read the gospel story of the Pharisee and the publican. Jesus' chastisement of the strictly observant religious man in that beautiful story of the two men who went up to the temple to pray – His criticism of the stance of the one who esteemed himself righteous while looking down upon the broken sinner beside him – could not be any clearer. The Master teaches us that in the Christian disciple's eyes there should be no look of scorn, no sign of contempt, no hint of condescension in regard to anyone else.

To come back to my childhood conversation about Judas' presence at and participation in the supper...

My young inquisitive mind had me want to tease out with the abbot whether the Eucharist should be considered as reserved only for those in whose life all is in perfect order. It struck me then that if things were understood in this way there would be few of us going to communion. I concluded that an exaggerated emphasis on being in a *state of grace* could be taken to imply that the Eucharist is only for saints. Already at eleven or twelve years of age, I knew intuitively that this just could not be right. I had grasped that people around me, just like myself, were none of them plaster-cast saints, but all of them people who struggled in

one way or another. I also knew that words are meant to have a meaning and that this applies to the words we speak in the liturgy. Given that we are all asked to speak the words *Lord I am not worthy* as we approach the Lord's Table, surely it is implied that every person who goes to communion should do so aware that he or she is a sinner, a person whose life is marked by shortcomings and failures. What was clear to me all those years ago remains true to this day: when we approach the Lord's Table we step forward to receive an unmerited gift. The Eucharist is a gracious gift of God's mercy; it is not some sort of well-merited prize! The Eucharist is a meal to which sinners are invited and in which sinners participate, otherwise the penitential rite with which we begin each Eucharistic celebration is at worst a lie and at best a charade. Our words *I am not worthy* should amount to something more than a mere polite formula. Catholic theology and an awareness of the Church's great spiritual tradition lead us to concur with what Christian thinkers and mystics have always considered to be the case: namely, that the Eucharist is *a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak*. According to the principle of *lex orandi lex credendi* (the fact that there is coherence between what the Church prays and what she believes), the sacrament in which we are invited to partake this evening is given to us for our healing.

Let's get things straight. Even very holy people aren't *perfect* in the unqualified sense. If people are truly holy, really perfect, they certainly do not think of themselves as being holy, nor will they claim for themselves any privilege; they would certainly never think that they should be ranked in the category of the *perfect*. When it comes to *perfection* as much as any of us can ever aspire to is to be striving for perfection. If we are *perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect*, then we will be *merciful as our God merciful, compassionate as He is compassionate* and therefore we won't want to turn people away.

All this to say that we must be careful not to put barricades around the Lord's Table. We must guard ourselves from barring access to the Lord's Table to those who need the *powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak* that is offered to all who approach this great sacrament with faith.

Clearly, it is medicine that is offered to God's children when they are invited to advance to the Holy Table at which the minister stands inviting all who are present – the broken, the wounded, those enslaved, those marked by sin, all of us – with words which give hope, containing as they do the Lord's own promise of forgiveness. Our redemption finds expression in the words spoken by the presiding priest: *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. The Eucharistic Table is *a Table for sinners*. Understand me. I am not advocating that we can approach the Lord in *any old way we please*. What I am insisting upon is that we approach the Lord with *humble, contrite hearts*. This attitude of humility and contrition is something the Church teaches us to have through her liturgical prayer. The prayers pronounced by the celebrant as he prepares the gifts at the Offertory have him speak in the name of all who are present saying that it is with *humble and contrite hearts* that we renew the offering of our broken, wounded selves. The call addressed to us as we gather for Eucharist is to come before the Lord honestly recognising that we are unworthy of such a gift; it is to confess that we are sick of soul, mind and heart; it is to express that we are spiritually hungry ... and to profess all this animated by a fervent desire to experience God's loving grace, encouraged by a holy hope that our hunger will be satisfied and our emptiness will be filled with God's gracious mercy.

I have already drawn attention to the fact that the great Catholic tradition understands the Eucharist as *medicine for the soul*. Anyone who takes medicine does so in the hope of a cure. So, clearly the Eucharist is not for those who would prefer to cling to their sin. I think it is Pope Francis who spoke the following words which I jotted down on a little piece of paper

not so long ago to convince myself of the great truth they express (I failed to note in my jottings where I found these lines) – I quote: *The Eucharist is for those who in their struggles seek to make some progress towards healing, new life, a better way of being. It is for those who aspire to be freed from their slavery to sin.*

Yes, as I've already said, the Eucharist is for struggling people. It is important for us to remember this. We must do so recalling that God's grace remains with us even in our struggles. Indeed, God's grace makes itself all the more available to us the greater the difficulties we experience in our lives. We must never lose sight of the fact that the life of Christ is forever with us. Christ always remains alive within us – even if only precariously at times, due to the habits of sin in our lives. St Paul tells us that it is especially when we are at our most fragile, when we are feeling weak and are floundering, that we are best led to know God's presence by our side. The apostle reminds us that it is precisely when we are at our weakest point – indeed, at times, near breaking point – that God's strength really manifests itself in our lives and sets to work within us.

A very important point is made in the first reading taken for this evening's celebration of the Lord's Supper. In the Exodus text it is drawn to our attention that the Eucharist is food for the journey. And what a journey! The mystery we celebrate here as we celebrate the Lord's Supper is rooted in the meal which a people of slaves were bidden to eat as they prepared to set out on their long journey into freedom. The Hebrew people were not getting ready to go for a stroll in the park. They were making themselves ready to set out on a long way that would lead them into freedom from injustice, liberation from oppression. They were fleeing Egypt as escapees; they were refugees setting out for a Land of Promise. A long trek lay before the Hebrew slaves; food was needed to fortify them as they embarked upon the road to liberty they were called to walk. They would set out conscious of something that would constantly be recalled to them: the assurance that the Lord their God – the One who called them – would remain with them right along the way.

The paschal meal spoken of in the Book of Exodus was instituted not only for those who initially experienced God's deliverance on that first sacred night of Passover, but for all future generations of God's People – ours included. Israel's coming forth from Egypt marked a turning point in the life of God's People for ever. Just as the Lord's Chosen Ones were asked to symbolise by the meal they shared that they were giving up their life of slavery and entering into a new life of responsibility and freedom, so we who celebrate the Eucharist this evening are called upon to recognise that we have a responsibility to engage ourselves in the way of freedom along which the Lord bids us walk. The prayer formula we use when we proclaim *Say but the word and I shall be healed* is a plea that could be echoed by all of us, framed in this slightly different way: *Lord speak the word that sets your people free – speak the word that liberates us from all the wounds of our past and from the ills that still debilitate us; free us from our chains of guilt and shame; free us from our regrets and sadness... Liberate us from all that still binds us and holds us back from knowing the fullness of life to which You call us!*

The Passover meal was meant to be shared – and so too our Eucharistic meal is meant to be a grace shared.

We cannot sit down at the Lord's Table unaware of and insensitive to those around us. In a special way God's People were instructed to give a place at their table to aliens and strangers in their midst. This is as true for us as for them. We must hold a place in our hearts for all such people. There are many displaced people all around us today. They await our welcome. In God's House no one is a stranger. From God's House no one can be excluded. That was a

lesson I learned young in life from my late mother when I accompanied her as a small child to Clonard Monastery church in Belfast. There were some people in that church on that particular day who were anxious about a vagrant man who had made his way into the building and was sitting on the back bench. My mum pointed out to me that this man above all others had his place in the church. She made a point of greeting him and leading me to do so too. No one can or should be relegated to an *outsider place* in the House of God. No one should ever be looked down upon or held apart from the community gathered for worship. Long before the 20th century, when this lesson was given to me by my mother, St Paul addressed the same issue when he wrote to the Church in Corinth. The second reading we heard this evening bears testimony to how Paul spent some time with the community at Corinth trying to gather them together in unity. Apparently some of the wealthier believers there looked down upon the poorer members of the community and refused to share with them from their abundance at the communion meal. The issue at Corinth might have been one of material wealth, our issues might be of another order and situated at a different level. Perhaps there are some of us who when we gather for Eucharist think of ourselves as spiritually wealthier than others – maybe even graced with a higher understanding of the mystery we celebrate, a more elevated Eucharistic theology. What Paul wrote to the Corinthians should put us on our guard. Paul made it clear that attitudes of superiority are extremely destructive and have no place in the Church. If we somehow think that others are below us, then we are at the wrong place; our attitude is simply not Christian. Paul called upon the Corinthians to making a searching and fearless examination of their attitudes. Clearly, some of them needed to recognise the pride they were harbouring in their hearts; they were called upon to humble themselves before the Lord and before their brothers and sisters in the faith.

The place all of us are called to hold when we come to the Lord's Table is that we see Christ take upon Himself in this evening's gospel passage. *Christ humbled Himself... He put on the apron of humility when He washed His disciples' feet.* The only One who was totally free on that evening when the group gathered to celebrate the Paschal Meal was the Master ... and what did He do? As Paul's Letter to the Philippians reminds us: *He took upon Himself the condition of a slave.* The Lord Jesus became a slave for our sakes. Christ, the Sinless One, identified Himself with us in our bondage in order to free us from sin's proud grip upon us. What Jesus did for His disciples He does for each one of us this evening. This is re-enacted for all of us liturgically – even though it is only a few of our number who will come forward for the gesture posed. At the washing of the feet, let us dare to imagine – or rather dare to experience – each one of us for our self, how Jesus kneels before us to bathe our feet. In the water poured over our feet we have a great symbol of Christ' healing, life-giving, life-restoring love – a love sealed by the holy kiss He gives us after having first cleansed us of our sin. I firmly believe that once we get over that reticence – indeed that refusal – first voiced by Peter, and dare to accept this intimate gesture of the Lord's tender, loving mercy in our regard – a gesture that is posed in all simplicity – then we will find that we no longer want to hold anyone else back from experiencing the grace we have come to know in the depths of our being. God's love is so soothing, so solacing, so greatly comforting, that once we have experienced it in our own lives, our heartfelt desire is that others may come into a similar experience in theirs. We want to hold no one back from knowing God's goodness as we have known it: our last thought is to bar anyone from having access to the plenitude of God's grace revealed by Christ Jesus who says to us as He poses this magnanimous gesture on the eve of His passion that we should do for each other what He has done for us. The mystery we celebrate here this evening should lead all of us to enter into the Lord's own movement of generous self-giving love. May we consent to that happening. *There is no greater love than*

this, to lay down one's life, give one's life out of love. May we live here the greatest love. May we lay down our lives. May we give them out of love.