

## **Holy Thursday – Year C (Apr. 5, 2007)**

Tonight is a night for remembering. We remember what the Lord has done for us. We remember what the Lord has asked us to do in return. And in that remembering we re-member in a different way: we put back together the body of Christ, we re-member what has been split apart by sin and selfishness.

The Jews begin their Passover celebration with a question. The youngest person present asks, “Why is this night different from every other night?” And the eldest person present begins the story of God’s great liberating act of salvation, the Exodus from captivity and slavery in Egypt.

When Jesus celebrated his last supper with his disciples he was remembering this same story. But he told it with a twist, a twist that would forever make it different and introduce another gift from God, another liberating act, into our world. He took the simple elements of the ritual, bread and wine, said words of consecration over them, and then gave them to his disciples, his very own body and blood to be his presence, his real presence in their midst until the end of time. He told them whenever you do this, you will be remembering me.

But that was not all. He was not content with simply adding new meaning to ancient gestures. When the meal was over he rose from table, took a basin of water and a towel and washed the feet of his disciples. As we can see from the reaction of Peter this was a startling gesture. Then after performing this symbolic gesture he told them that they must do for one another what he had done for them.

A little later in John’s Gospel he will tell them, “Love one another as I have loved you,” and “There is no greater love than to give one’s life for one’s friends.” Jesus will give his life for them. There is no greater love and this is how he tells them to love one another. Foot-washing is simply another way of doing this.

It has always fascinated me that in John’s Gospel there is no account of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Not that the Eucharist is absent from John’s Gospel. Not at all. After the story of the loaves and fishes there is a long discourse on the Bread of life, the Eucharist. But in

the passage you just heard it was about washing feet. My own feeling is that for John foot-washing is every bit as important as Eucharist. Indeed I would go so far as to say that for John, foot-washing IS Eucharist. The two go together. And that, I think, tells us a great deal about what must happen when we come together to worship God and to share the Eucharist. Our celebration tonight is a model for what all our Eucharists should be. We are nourished at the table of the Word and then we are nourished at the table of the Eucharist. We become bread for the world as we become the body of Christ. In between the two tables tonight is a special ritual of foot-washing which shows us the link between the two.

Something else, perhaps more subtle, is also going on here. As Jesus assumes the role of humble servant before his disciples, no one is omitted. He kneels before Peter who will deny him, and he kneels before Judas who will betray him. He looks into their eyes and perhaps says "It's all right. I love you anyway." Our own celebration must always be as open, loving and welcoming as Jesus was before his disciples. No one should be excluded.

As one spiritual writer (Megan McKenna, "Lent: The Sunday Readings," p. 198) puts it: This ritual is not just a momentary or one-time experience to impress upon the disciples the depth of Jesus' love for them. It is a moment that ritualizes and intensifies his entire life and the love that is at the root of all his actions.

This night is about bread and wine, about bodies and blood, about feet and washing, about intimacy and unbounded, unexpected love, about a God who bends before us, hoping that one day we will treat each other with the same regard and dignity that he has always lavished upon us. This is what the new covenant is about. This is what reality and religion are about. This is what community and love are all about. This is how we re-member the Body of Christ.

Some theologians say that basically Jesus was killed because of the way he ate, of the people he ate with, and what he encouraged them to do with one another as sign of their allegiance to him and to the Kingdom of God.

We are invited, not only this night, but every day of our lives, to eat and drink at the table of the Lord, to have our feet washed, to enter the wounds and the heart of Christ, to be the friends that he loves so very much.

And we are told to do as Jesus did. We must wash each other's feet. We must be bread for the world. Jesus expressed his love in service to the world. Now he invites us to do the same: to feast, to love and to serve, to re-member the Body of Christ.