

Holy Thursday 2022

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” The question Jesus asked the Apostles is put to us as well each Holy Thursday – *a question that takes on even deeper meaning in times of suffering, disappointment, loss, and turmoil in our lives, when we most need what Jesus has done for us.*

For the Twelve, the annual Passover ritual must have seemed profoundly different this time – not just a familiar remembrance of what God did long ago for their ancestors, but weighted with a foreboding sense that something unexpected was about to happen. Little did they understand at the time that this Something was the very turning point of all of human history, the redemption that swallows up every human No to God’s love in their Master’s free acceptance of the Cross. Widely-scattered hints and foreshadowings in the Scriptures are harmonized by Jesus into three inseparable mysteries: the Eucharist, the priesthood, and loving service, symbolized by the washing of the disciples’ feet.

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” The verb Jesus uses is translated here as “understand,” but it also means ... do you realize what I have done for you? He is asking not merely about the grasp of a concept, having a clear idea. Rather, Jesus is asking His disciples: Do you realize what I have done ... that is, does it become *real in you*, does it come to life in you ... does it make a difference for you? “Do you understand” is a question not only about how we think. It is about how we live, about how we DO THIS in memory of Him, not just at Mass, but in our daily lives, in challenges great and opportunities small.

So what HAS Jesus done for us? These readings, and Christian tradition from the very first days, present the unmistakable parallels between the Last Supper and the Passover in the Book of Exodus. In Egypt, God heard His people’s cries and intervened through His servant Moses to set them free, to lead them

from slavery to someplace new. Through the Blood of the Paschal Lamb, they are protected from the death that would befall the first-born of the Egyptians. The night *before* this saving event takes place, God gives them the ritual they are to observe ever after: to feed with unleavened bread on the flesh of the Lamb. So too, at the Last Supper, Christ, the new Moses sent by the Father to teach the New Law of Love, leads the true Exodus from the slavery of sin and death. The true Lamb of God sheds His blood – the first-born of the Father Who takes death to Himself to transform it into the passage to life. The *night before the Passion of the Cross*, He gives them the new ritual they are to observe ever after, and consecrates the Apostles as priests of this new Covenant ... that through the ages, we might feed with unleavened bread that has truly become the flesh of the Lamb of God.

But John vividly remembers something else about that night: *Jesus washed his feet, and the feet of the other Apostles*. This action, the work of a slave, seems harder to fit with the Exodus pattern. How are we to understand this?

For John, the meaning is clear: what Christ is doing is the true Passover, the reality that Moses could only point to from afar. Jesus is about to pass from this world to the Father, to pass over from death to life – and He does it precisely by laying down His very life – passing from self to self-gift, passing from being Teacher and Master to being Servant and Least. He not only comes to free His people from slavery, but He does the work of the slave HIMSELF on their behalf. He unites Himself with the enslaved, just as Moses had done in the Old Testament, and even more, as He would do in taking on all human sinfulness to Himself with the Cross. *Jesus passes from His earlier words: The Father is always with Me – to those chilling words of Good Friday, where Christ completely identifies Himself with the power of sin to alienate us from the Father: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned Me?”* This passing over, this

self-emptying, is symbolized by removing His outer garments ... surrendering His glory, as the next day He will submit to being stripped of His garments ... and bending low, laying down to be nailed to the Cross, to serve us. And all of this is also contained in the Eucharist, where Jesus gives Himself in the Eucharist to the Apostles that night, and continually gives Himself to us in the same Eucharist across all these ages, until He returns in His risen glory at the end of all things.

“Do you understand what I have done for you? As I have done for you, you should also do.” We too must pass over to the Father ... not only at the end of our lives here, when we hope to share in Christ’s risen life; but in each act of love, passing over in the same way – by going out of ourselves, passing from self to self-gift, from being those who wish to receive mercy to those who wish to bestow mercy. When we pause to listen to a troubled friend; when we give to a worthy charity; when we do an unexpected kindness; when we pray for those who are difficult for us ... we realize in our lives what Jesus has done.

As you approach Him in this Eucharist above all other times of the year, hear that question: “Do you understand – do you **realize** – what I have done for you?” Does it come to life for you, does it become real in you and make a difference? *Christ has passed over and passes into us, tonight, in the Eucharist, that we may answer that question with our lives – so that as he has done, we will also do, in memory of Him.*