



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

Holy Thursday Year B

If I do not wash your feet you can have no part in me

Readings: Exodus 12: 1-8, 11-14, Ps 115, 2 Corinthians 11: 23-26, John 13: 1-15

The truth is that the Homily is most powerfully rehearsed in the actions that will follow and so our words need not be long. Maundy Thursday is, for the faithful, the most precious night.

We are given the promise of the Presence in the gift of the Mass. We are entrusted with the priesthood. God reveals to us the depth of His love for us and the nature of the service and sacrifice that will transform the destiny of fallen Man.

But, on a practical level, it is always a bit fraught. Getting 'volunteers' to have their feet washed by the priest is a major task. Sr. Pauline has to battle her way past people's embarrassment, reticence, shyness, whatever to get a quorum. You would be amazed how often people give St. Peter's reply, 'It's not right. You shall never wash my feet.' Without paying attention to Our Lord's reply, 'You may not understand just now but if I do not wash your feet you can have no part in me'.

This strange event, in its intense physicality, is not part of the liturgy by accident. It is all of a piece with the revelation that will reach its climax on the Calvary and in the miracle of the Third Day.

If you want to know the power of this sign I want you to imagine, for a moment, what kind of church we would be, what kind of saviour we would be proclaiming if Christ had ordered things the other way round.

What if the disciples had been ordered to wash Jesus' feet?

I would be sitting on a golden throne in the sanctuary while everyone who claimed to be a follower of Jesus would come up one by one and kiss my feet. That would be a very different church and a very strange gospel. It would be little different from the usual tyrannies confectioned by sinful man.

What Jesus does for His disciples on Maundy night, what the priests, from the Pope down, do on this sacred day for their people is to enact a reality utterly transformed by divine love. The Servant of the servants of God takes off his glorious garments and kneels. It is a sign of the utter condescension of God in Christ and therefore of His Church.

I use that word 'condescension' not in its familiar meaning of 'patronizing behaviour' but of its true meaning, that is 'to be down with'. Christ Himself is God's incredible condescension to Man. In Jesus He has become one with us.

But Jesus goes one step further. He not only walks among men as one of them but tonight He takes the part of a slave, the house servant whose job it is to greet the honoured dinner guests by pouring cool refreshing water over their dusty feet and gently towelling them dry.

As we have our feet washed and dried it is a strange sensation. I remember having my feet dried by a man when I came out of the waters at Lourdes last year and reflecting that the last time anyone had dried my feet was my Mum when I was about three years old. It was an extraordinary moment.

So we become both honoured guests at the banquet of the King of Kings and also little children in the hands of our Mother. This sign is given us by Christ to remind us of the amazing love of God. It is given to remind us of the priestly task of service and it is given to remind us that all of us, as the priesthood of all believers, have this selfsame task in the world.

When we leave tonight, after our hour of watching, we will gaze into the vault of heaven and wonder anew that the great God, who created infinite worlds, condescended to our low estate and came among us to serve.

We will know again that the Sovereign of all not only kneels to wash us of the dust and dirt of our earthly pilgrimage but places Himself into our hands at every Mass that has ever followed the first Maundy and has entrusted His whole mission and ministry to this little band of the faithful, now and throughout time.

The Church that proclaims the glory must also wear the towel.