



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

Holy Thursday – Years A, B, C

Stay with us, Lord

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

Ever since I gave over my earthly pilgrimage to Christ, some forty years ago, this night has always seemed to me a gift of the greatest beauty because it gives us two of the greatest gifts of our Faith. Let me explain.

Three years ago I went into the baths at Lourdes. Those of you who have been will probably, like me, recall this as the most profoundly moving moment of your pilgrimage. Here, in a simple shed I took off my clothes and was wrapped in linen towel. A helper stood either side of me as I approached the bath fed by the spring which Our Lady revealed to Saint Bernadette. I made the intention of my heart before the crucifix and was plunged under the icy water. A few moments later I was back in the changing room towelling off and reacquainting myself with my ordinary clothes. And then there was a moment which I shall never forget.

An old man, a helper, knelt down and began to dry my feet. As he did so I reflected, with some emotion, that the last person who had done that for me was almost certainly my mother and that some sixty years ago. It was a moment of startling physical intimacy and spiritual poignancy.

In a few moments Fr. John and I will kneel and do what we have done for some seventy years between us. We will wash and dry the feet of twelve representatives of this community who seek to faithfully follow Christ. We will do so *in persona Christi* representing the Lord's loving service to His disciples in the Upper Room on the night that He was betrayed as He prepared to be the sacrifice for our salvation.

It is a liturgical sign of the practical reality of every priestly ministry and one that every priest will undertake from Pope Francis down. We kneel with Christ, robed in the towel of a slave in order to be, as that greatest of Papal titles reminds us, 'the Servant of the servants of God.'

The washing of the feet harks back to an ancient world. Today we put our feet into our socks and shoes and don't give them another thought. The faithful unsung servants that carry us about seldom merit our attention. But when you wore sandals on the hot dusty road the slave to bathe your weary and sand worn feet was a welcome courtesy and joyful relief.

On this most extraordinary night, therefore, Jesus does two amazing things. He exemplifies the gracious condescension of God to His creatures and teaches a pattern of leadership which is alien to the fallen world. Without diminishing for one moment His supreme authority, He kneels to serve those He has come to save. He washes with water those whom He will shortly ransom with His Blood.

For the humble parish priest this is the daily paradox of his ministry and mission. He can never diminish the authority of God and yet he must serve the wanderer and welcome him on the way of salvation. Sometimes there is a suggestion that you can choose between the teachings of the Faith and

a pastoral heart but this is to misunderstand, for both the Faith and the Pastoral Heart find their undivided origin in Jesus. The Way of Salvation is not an easy road but we know He kneels to wash our weary feet.

Nor does Jesus leave it at that.

While the shocked disciples, proto apostles, are still trying to work out what kind of government they are going to have authority in, Jesus makes the final preparation for the journey, their journey. If they are going on a pilgrimage of mercy, what will become the journey of the universal church, they will need sustenance. They will need food for the journey. They will need Viaticum. They will need Him.

So Jesus takes the very history of the salvation of the People of God, the Passover, the moment of liberation from sin and slavery and death, and translates it into the sacred connection between time and eternity, between God and Man. In His hands the bread of the Exodus becomes the Bread from Heaven, His Body. In His hands the cup of Passover wine becomes the Chalice of Salvation in His Precious Blood.

In the mystery of the Mass which Jesus gives us this very night, the four traditional chalices of the Passover become one. The Sanctifying, the Words of God, the Blessing and the Praising cups are united in Jesus. Listen to the Eucharistic Prayer.

The four ages that these Passover cups symbolise, This World, the Messianic Age, The Resurrection and the World to Come are telescoped into the person of Christ and in Christ each age has access to the other. How else would we, tired and shabby pilgrims in this world, have

knowledge of the Messianic Age, confidence in the Resurrection and hope of the world to come? How else would we know ourselves in the company of the Communion of the Saints? How else would we know that what starts as dust returns to dust yet will be transformed to glory?

In this extraordinary night we are reaffirmed as pilgrims. We are washed clean, ministered to by the Master with infinite love and care, and sent out on our journey sustained by His miraculous Presence.

That journey will take us on the Via Dolorosa and to the Calvary.

It will lead us to the tomb and to the triumph of the Third Day. 'Mane nobiscum, Domine', 'Remain with us, Lord'.

Both our journey back to the Holy City and the prayer of all Emmaus Road disciples, is made possible by the gift of this most holy night. That is our prayer. It is we who now return to the Holy City and will be sent out into the world, pilgrims and apostles. It is that same prayer, 'Stay with us, Lord', the prayer of priest and people down two millennia of faithful worship, the invocation of the Presence, that has been answered in the miracle of the Maundy and the Mystery of the Mass.