



Homily
Mass of the Lords Supper
Maundy Thursday
1st April 2021

The Eucharist is not a fact to be proven but the presence of Jesus who invites us to encounter him. And so, we must decide, how are we going to deepen our relationship with, in the words of the Catechism, the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, together with his Soul and Divinity, under the appearance of bread and wine? The Gospel tells us this evening, eucharistic faith alone is not enough, faith must lead to Caritas and to authentic service, for where true charity is dwelling, God is present there.

The Gospel according to John has given us much to deepen our understanding of the Eucharist, beginning with the sublime statement, and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory. There is a clue perhaps, in the word flesh. It is a rather ordinary word. George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona community, used to love telling the story of a visit to South Africa and the Christmas decorations over a small township. A banner proudly proclaimed the message of the angels. Unfortunately, the final E in highest had come adrift, and so the banner seemed to say, Glory to God in the High St. It is fitting that we should find the Word made flesh amongst the ordinary and even the messy.

This evening then, the Gospel invites us to contemplate the eucharistic mystery, the presence of the Lord Jesus in his two natures, human and divine, and precisely in a manner that speaks more clearly than any lofty theological symbol of faith, in fact in the action of washing feet, with water destined for the drains. This is the master's example to us, the true sign we believe in the eucharistic presence of Jesus in the Church. And we are to copy what he has done. Perhaps because we are unable to re-enact this Gospel moment because of the pandemic restrictions, we are encouraged not to dismiss this as some quirky liturgical ritual, but to find ways in which we can metaphorically wash each other's feet in loving service within our communities.

This evening is the birth of sacred priesthood in the Church. But I sense we have much to learn about priesthood from tomorrow's Gospel account too. It is no coincidence, the day for the sanctification of priests is the solemnity of the Sacred Heart. As we shall hear tomorrow afternoon, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance; and immediately there came out blood and water. The Sacred heart preface speaks of this moment, that this blood and water is the wellspring of the Church's sacraments, so that, won over to the open heart of the Saviour, all might draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation.

In this evening's Gospel moment, in the contemplation of the Sacred Heart, filled with charity, we see the true meaning of sacred priesthood. The priest is invited by his Master, to be always moving towards the altar, and then from the eucharistic table, to be washing his fellow disciples' feet. To the eyes of the world, much of a priest's ministry, seems on the surface of things, to be a life washed down the sink.

But to the eyes of faith, the three mysteries of the Mass of the Lord's Supper are brought together; the institution of the Holy Eucharist, and of the priestly order, and the commandment of the Lord concerning fraternal charity. The priest will never understand his vocation, unless he ponders the four eucharistic verbs; take, bless, break and share, and applies them to his own life and ministry as well as the sacrifice he offers.

The Catechism tells us, the Church exists in local communities and is made real as a liturgical, above all a eucharistic, assembly. Tradition tells us, St Ignatius of Antioch was a disciple of St John, the beloved disciple. Ignatius proclaimed of the Eucharist, wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be; as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. We are gathered this evening, priests and people, together with the Bishop. Here with the eucharistic Lord amongst us, we adore, we experience the Church as the pilgrim people of God, longing for the coming of the Lord, yearning to be gathered together as one. Christ's presence is an invitation to look forward in confidence. When we look back over this year, and call to mind what our world is still going through, there is much to rob us of this confidence. But we have been washed clean in the baptismal waters and in the Body and Blood of Christ, which we share together in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. And all this will strengthen us to recommit ourselves to Caritas, to the service which defines us as true disciples of Jesus.