

“A Model to Follow”
Our Lady of Dallas
April 2, 2015 (Holy Thursday)
Readings: Ex 12:1-8, 11-14; 1 Cor 11:23-26
Gospel: John 13:1-15

Love to the End

It is evening on Holy Thursday. We know more about tonight than any other night in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the evening of his last meeting with his intimate friends – his “farewell discourse” (cf. Jn 14-17). It is the evening of the Last Supper and the Institution of the Eucharist. It is the evening of the foot-washing, both a dramatic gesture and a great charge to us all: “If I therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” It is the night on which he and his disciples sang hymns and traveled to the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:30). It is the night he sweat blood as he prayed, growing in his acceptance of “the cup” offered by his Father (Mt 26:42). It is the night of diabolic conspiracy and betrayal (Jn 13:27). It is the night on which the darkness descended (Jn 13:30), only to prove once and for all that it will never overcome the light (Jn 1:5).

If it is even possible to unify all that took place tonight, it would have to be with something like the opening lines of the Gospel tonight: there it says that this was the night on which Jesus “loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1). From his ministry we knew that Jesus loves us; but it is tonight, the eve of his Passion, that we begin to understand the measure of his love. Tonight we sound the depths of the love of God, to discover that there is no bottom, no limit to his love. Enduring the limits of our capacity for evil, God proved there is no end to his love within our horizons; for us, the end of his love is as mysterious as its beginning in the ageless life of the Holy Trinity. For tonight we see that there is no destiny the incarnate Son would not accept for the sake of love. Tonight, to the utter confusion of his disciples, Jesus, the King of kings, takes the place of a slave; guiltless, he accepts the fate of a criminal and blasphemer; the most lovable person on the earth, he endures his betrayal to death by a friend. Evil did its worst tonight. For there is no greater sin than to betray, mock, spit on and crucify the divine hand that feeds us. Tonight evil spread its putrid arms as widely as possible. But in the face of it all, we glimpse the unconquered love of Jesus, glowing miraculously like a

candle at the bottom of the darkest corner of the ocean as he cries out from the cross: “Father forgive them” (Lk 23:34). He truly loved us “to the end” – like watching a point race off a page of graph paper along a vector to the end of an infinite line, tonight we watch his heart beat further and faster as its measure surpasses our horizon and races off into the mysterious depths of the infinite love of God.

Jesus: Our Model of Love

As far beyond our horizons as this unconquerable love may be, it was not shown to us as some freakish display of divinity, something determined to remain alien to our own possibilities as human beings. Jesus is our model of love precisely as a model of love to the end. For the gestures of love that we remember tonight – the foot-washing¹ we hear about in the Gospel and the institution of the Eucharist we hear about in the second reading – are both ones he charges us to imitate in his memory.

Both gestures are, moreover, presented to us as such simple, humanly accessible expressions of love to the end. In the shadow of his betrayal, Jesus simply *rises, divests, puts on a towel, pours water, washes and dries* the feet of his disciples. And later he *takes bread, breaks it, gives thanks and gives it to his disciples to eat*. The record of these gestures preserved for us includes so many references to the simple, bodily action of Jesus: he rises, changes clothes, pours, washes, dries, takes, breaks, thanks and gives – all as a humble, human expression of his love for us to the end, his desire to serve us in the most basic and necessary ways: by washing and feeding us, like a mother washes and feeds her child. The evangelist does not rush through the memory, saying merely, “He washed their feet” or “He instituted the Eucharist.” He records the details of Jesus’ bodily movements, savoring and contemplating the memory. Jesus gives himself to his disciples through his body, through simple human acts of service undertaken out of a divine love.

¹ Feet shod only in sandals would get very dirty on the unpaved roads of Palestine, and so it was customary hospitality to provide water for a guest to wash his own feet. Slaves – but only Gentile slaves – could be commissioned to perform this service. As a sign of devotion, occasionally disciples would render this service to their teacher or rabbi. Jesus, the master and teacher, therefore humiliates himself by taking up this service. The meaning of this gesture is crystal clear: the Son of Man, as he himself declared, really “did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). And the application of this gesture to the Christian community is just as clear: no one of us is above our Master; and if Jesus serves, so too should we all. There is no place among Christians for elitism, for appeals to rank or private privileges – it belongs to the essence of our identity to love one another with the love of Jesus, serving each other in such simple and yet dramatic ways. As Jesus said to his disciples on this very night, “Love one another as I love you” (Jn 15:9). Cf. Brown, “The Gospel According to John” in *The Anchor Bible*, 564.

Jesus: Not Merely a Model of Love: *Exemplum et Sacramentum*

From this point of view, we see the two gestures converging. In both the foot-washing and the Eucharist, Christ makes clear to us the meaning of his life and death – the gift of his body to the end. He is God *for us* in love. He is on our side, to the end, no matter what. In the shadow of betrayal, God takes the role of a slave to wash our feet; and he takes the role of food to nourish us with his own life. These gestures show us that God truly is among us as one who serves: “the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28).

But these two gestures do not totally converge. The second is different from the first; in fact, it is only with the second – the gift of the Eucharist – that we come to understand the full meaning of the first. If we knew only the foot-washing, Jesus would appear to be our model, but not our nourishment. He would show us the divine depths to which our hearts should strive; but he would not become for us the strength needed to reach those depths. After he washes the feet of the disciples, he says, “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” Here his body – his life of simple service – appears to be merely a model; an exterior form to imitate. But at the institution of the Eucharist, Jesus says, “Take this all of you, and eat of it. This is my body, given up for you.” Here his body – his life of simple service – is not simply to be imitated: it is to be consumed; it is to become our nourishment, the source of our own life and strength.

Now we begin to grasp what is so special – so sacramental and mystical – about our lives as Christians: God is not only our model (*exemplum*); he is our very life (*sacramentum*). Ultimately, the guiding rule for our life as Christians is not best expressed as WWJD: ‘What would Jesus do? He would wash my neighbor’s feet – and therefore so should I. He would serve my neighbor in love – and therefore so should I.’ Our life as Christians is ruled not merely by Jesus the model. It is ruled ultimately by Jesus the bread. For he is not an extrinsic example for our life; he is its deepest interior principle. Our participation in his glorious Passion – the destiny of the greatest lover the world has ever known – is not adequately described as a participation by imitation. In the Eucharist, Jesus gives us a new kind of participation in his life: he makes himself into a vine, a reality in which we participate as true branches – not as isolated mini-vines striving independently to pattern ourselves upon his example. In the Eucharist, Jesus turns his

life into a wood that is able to constitute both himself (the trunk) and us (the branches). The Eucharist is, therefore, a bridge of immediacy: it is the one Body that unites two into one; it is the wood that *is* truly both trunk and branch, the channel bringing life from its divine source to each and every member.

Got Acting in Us

So, it is not enough to ask ourselves ‘What would Jesus do?’ – As if our lives were to be ruled by wondering, ‘What would Jesus do if were here, acting in my place?’ With a Eucharistic faith, it is more right to ask ourselves, ‘What *is* Jesus actually doing with and through me?’ Our lives as Christians are sacramental and mystical – in the Eucharist, the life of the Son of God becomes the principle of our own life. So much so that in faith we come to understand that our bodies and lives are not our own but his; that is, our bodies and lives can truly be said to be the body and life of Christ. St. Paul says, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit, and that you are not your own?” (1 Cor 6:19). And elsewhere he says, “I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:19-20). We live united to Christ and his love *to the end* – like St. Paul, as Christians we live crucified in Christ; and Christ lives crucified in us.

It is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. This is what it means to be redeemed: to be recreated, redefined by sacramental and mystical union with Christ. When we say “I” before God the Father, we no longer speak by ourselves. Our “I” has been caught up into a new subjectivity, the “I” of Christ coming to full stature (4:13); “our “I” [is] being absorbed into his [...]”² – “I live, yet no longer I” (Gal 2:20). As the Father looks upon the Eucharistic body of his Son – the one Body extended through time and space, united from head to toe, from trunk to branch – he sees us, beautiful and beloved. It is the Eucharist – the wood that binds branch to the trunk – that makes this possible: God gives himself to us as *nourishment*, as the principle of a new life, strengthening us by his own life, allowing us to share in his communion of love for eternity: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day” (Jn 6:54).

We are about to witness Abbot Peter wash the feet of twelve young students. As we do so, we remember all the simple, humble ways in which we try to wash each other’s feet in

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two*, 64.

imitation of Jesus Christ. This service we offer each other in our bodies is governed by the words of consecration we will hear just a few minutes from now. The words of consecration – “This is my body” and “This is my blood” – speak of a transformation that extends to our own bodies and lives, to all who are nourished by the Eucharist. In his prayers, St. Augustine once heard the God speaking: “I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me.”³ What a gift, the Christian life: to wash another’s feet, to love another “to the end” in such simple, human ways, and to know in that moment that the heart of God is beating inside your own. Through the Eucharist, God wills to transform our acts of love into his own divine love to the end. Our lives are no longer our own, God is filling them with his own. Through the Eucharist, “Jesus’ action becomes ours, because he is acting in us.”⁴ Through the most humble acts of human service, we are taken up into his identity as the Son of God – and in him we feel the warmth of the Father’s smile, as we experience ourselves transformed through the Word by which he consecrates all creation.

³ *Confessions*, VII 10,16.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two*, 63.