

LOVE AND SERVICE AT THE HEART OF THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY

Jn 13.1-15 Ex 12.1-14 1Cor 11.23-26

On this very different Holy Thursday, as we gather again in prayer as a real community, near and far, virtually present to each other at this uncertain time, let's acknowledge the beauty of life and love, family and friendship, of which we are hopefully even more focussed and appreciative at this uncertain, and frightening time.

It could be said we live in interesting times, as we do, but the more we know, the more we know we don't know, as with all the science and technological knowledge we have come to possess, this pandemic has brought home to us that we humans don't have all the answers, that life is precious, and that we don't know what tomorrow brings for each of us, and also that we need to listen to and observe what the experts tell us, as how to best act in such a crisis.

At the same time, it seems to me that, as we have very suddenly come to realize our limitations, and seen some of the darker side of human nature leaping out at us, with selfish and irrational behaviour, crises such as this can also bring out the best in the majority of us. We are sharply reminded of our interdependency, the importance of family and friends, and also our need to look after ourselves, and so, for many of us, staying at home is perhaps a penance, but also a mixed blessing, where we can have more time to reflect, pray, and engage more deeply with those closest to us, whom we can sometimes take for granted.

Of the positive aspects, I've read of a laid off airline pilot who is currently driving a delivery van to take groceries to those who are shut in because of age, illness or whose health is compromised such that they cannot go out to shop for their essential needs themselves. Many neighbours are more conscious of looking out for each other, and families have more time together, something which the pressures and rush of modern daily life can restrict us from. This all reflects a response to service in ordinary and simple ways.

Last Palm Sunday was interesting for me, as it was the first Sunday I suspect in my life, where I had no face to face contact with anyone at all. I did, however try to make contact by phone, with some of our parishioners on our Communion/Visitation list, who cannot receive Eucharist at the moment, and some of our regular daily Mass participants, whom I know must be feeling the angst at not being able to freely worship as they are accustomed. Usually, I try to visit and anoint those who cannot attend Mass regularly, and are on our list for regular care, but this time, an alternative approach was needed.

So, there is the means of communication there, to keep in touch, to encourage and verbally support each other, here even visually as well, with the wonders of the internet, and to be patient

in hoping for a return to a more normal situation, as there's no end in sight yet, just the ongoing warnings to be careful and to stay at home.

And now we come to the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples, noting that John doesn't necessarily specify just the apostles, although Leonardo de Vinci and so many other portrayers of the classic scene home in on, from Warhol to Dali to an infinite number of artists through the centuries.

The Gospel says Jesus showed how perfect his love was, and then moves immediately to Jesus washing their feet. As I often say, it's not about dirty feet (*although that would be a reality in those times, without too much paving!*), but rather the symbol of hospitality and welcome, which is a call for all, whoever she or he or you or me may be! The key figure in this revelation is Jesus himself, constantly, and now, at the end, still at the service of others, and Peter at first doesn't like it! He can be a bit fickle, we know, offering us all hope, as aren't we too, like him?

The English Catholic *The Tablet* journal puts it well, with the heading "***Service replaces the creed of greed***"! A rather apt thought for the present time, don't you think? It quotes Pope Francis, in a reflection on Jesus calming the storm, so I repeat. He suggests that this is: "*A time to choose what matters and what passes away... We can look to so many exemplary companions for the journey, who, even though fearful, have reacted by giving their lives. This is the force of the Spirit poured out and fashioned in courageous and generous self-denial... How many people every day are exercising patience and offering hope, taking care to sow not panic but a shared responsibility. How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday gestures, how to face up to and navigate a crisis by adjusting their routines, lifting their gaze and fostering prayer... Prayer and quiet service: these are our victorious weapons.*"

We need to acknowledge and comment those in the front line of service, the medical professionals, nurses and doctors, who effectively take serious but measured risks on behalf of us all, for the good of the community and care for those who are afflicted. Then there are so many other workers in different fields of service, who continue to work out there, to support the needs of our community and society. This is where the call of Jesus endures, as his great commandment to love one another echoes down through the ages, as he calls us his friends, in terms of us being friends who care for one another, and not just ourselves nor just those with whom we feel comfortable.

Then, on the sacramental side, here, of course, we hear the first account of the Eucharistic celebration in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, a practice which has endured from the start and which we continue as we gather now, unfortunately only virtually at present, but certainly together in spirit and faith.

So let's hang in there, as they say, see this as something different, as a spiritual Communion, and reflect meanwhile, on how we can be better friends of service to others in their need, both near and far, even as we hunker down as advised in this uncertain time, which surely will ultimately end in enlightenment, peace and hopefully a more reflective and realistic attitude to our true priorities in life.

The example of Jesus is loud and clear, "*so that you may copy what I have done to you*", as we move into the darkness now, to recall his last night, the Agony in the garden, the betrayal, the denial, the cock crowing, as the just and good man in Jesus, is condemned for no good reason, apart from the perceived threatening truth of a God of love, forgiveness, mercy and compassion, whom he proclaimed to those who resented his presence in this world, as we continue to do this in memory of him, whose presence endures with us.

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