

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Holy Thursday April 1st 2021

Well this is all rather different – different from what happened last year, but also different from what we usually do. It is a shame that we cannot have the washing of feet that is usually one of the great liturgical actions of the year; and it is a shame that we cannot watch in the garden with Christ at the end of Mass. In a way this has been one of the great recurring themes of the last year, “it is a shame that we can’t – fill in the blanks yourself: go on holiday, see friends, go to the pub, visit family, get married go to work”; the list goes on and on. This has been a year when we have inevitably spent a lot of time focussing on what is not possible. In a way that is a natural human reaction when things go wrong: we focus first of all on what we have lost, on the ways in which what we have now is less than what we used to have. When Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery into the wilderness, they were soon complaining. They didn’t have enough to drink; they didn’t like the food; they wanted a God created by themselves, because he would be much easier to deal with than one so much bigger than them. Suddenly the horrifying days of slavery were remembered as not so bad after all.

Focussing on what we have lost, on the ways in which things are not so good any more, is a natural human behaviour, but it is not the way of Christ; and over the next few days we are going to see how he breaks out of that again and again. Whenever it look as if things have got worse, he pulls off something that is better than before, not worse. This began on Sunday, when a tense confrontation in Jerusalem, which would have made for some frightening memories for his followers, was completely overshadowed by that memorable triumphant entrance into the city. The same thing happens tonight. Jesus has only a few hours of freedom left, and he knows it. These are his last moments of liberty. With only hours left, what will he do? He knows that tomorrow he will wake up a prisoner. The Collect of this Mass tells us that ‘*when about to hand himself over to death*’ he ‘*entrusted to the Church a sacrifice new for all eternity, the banquet of his love*’. Faced with a dramatic loss, the loss of his liberty, he was not paralysed by what was being lost, but driven to find something better. Rather than being overcome with the loss of the familiar, Jesus is driven on by the possibility of something new.

Faced with the loss of everything, as Jesus was, it would be very easy to descend into a sort of morose sadness, a cloud of blackness. But this is not the way that he shows us. Whatever may have been going on in his head, he is energised by the need for something ‘new for all eternity’. And so he spends his last hours setting a model for every crisis. Surrounded by men who must have been full of fears about what they could see was about to happen, with a foreboding sense of a terrible loss hanging over them, he sets about being, for them, a calm and non-anxious presence in the midst of the fear and loss. Whatever his own feelings were, he passes his last hours of freedom in giving himself to the men around him. He meets their anxiety with his calmness. He meets their fears of loss with an extra generosity: lets not spend this time looking at what we are losing, let us spend it in generosity and gift, and so he takes off his outer garment and washes their feet. All of that tension and fear is washed away in a simple but intimate gesture of love and devotion. And, because he knows that there are plenty more dark times ahead, he gives to them a gift for all time. The gift of himself, in form

of bread and wine. Every Mass is a break from the anxiety and the loss, every Mass is a meeting with the one who washes feet and feeds his friends when he could have been expected to be thinking only of what was coming to him.

In anxious times Holy Thursday, different as it is from usual, invites us to spend a little time resting in the calm and non-anxious presence of Christ. He kneels before us to wash our feet, an intimate act performed with great tenderness that shows us that as long as there is one person who will care for another, then all is well. This day draws us into the sacrifice new for all eternity where that same calm presence offers us a point of stillness every day, a place where, whatever may be going on around us, all is calm. And, before leading us out across the valley to the Mount of Olives he reminds us 'I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you'. In anxious times it is down to us, as individuals but also as the Church, to be the calm and serene presence that soothes the anxieties of the world.