

Reflection for Holy Thursday 2020

In the normal run of things, Holy Thursday dramatically disrupts the usual routine. It marks a momentous day: the day the Lord washed his disciples feet; the day he gave us the gift of the Eucharist; the day he gave us the gift of the priesthood; the day he prayed alone in the garden, waiting for his betrayer to come. These were extraordinary events, leaving the world changed for ever, and in the normal run of things we mark them with a dramatic break from ordinary life. In the world before the virus, we would have gathered together in the evening as the local Catholic community; we would have rung the bells with joy during the Gloria, knowing that after that our church bells would fall silent until the great good news of Saturday night. The priest would have shed his vestment so that he could kneel one by one in front of twelve of you to wash your feet, and after Mass we would have processed to watch with the Eucharistic Lord in a chapel that becomes for us a garden. How dramatically unlike anything else we do all year this is.

This year we can do none of it, and so the sense that this day is unlike any other is lost. We will have to work hard to hold onto the fact that this day holds deep and beautiful mysteries, and raises the curtain on the Triduum, the great three days that shake the world. For us, the priests, this day is especially strange. We always need you, our people, of course, but today we really need you more than ever. We need to be reminded of what lies at the heart of our priesthood, and that is the call to make God's presence real in your lives, to promote a meeting between you and God, to build a bridge between your daily lives and the life of God. That is what we are striving to find new ways to do for you, and that is what lies behind the annual disruption that is Holy Thursday. It is good for us to kneel down in front of some of you and wash your feet, and it is good for you to see it happening. We will miss this. We want to share with you the love and the tenderness and the mercy and the gentleness of God, and on this day it is harder than ever to do this in isolation. There are some things you just cannot do with Zoom! We want to share with you the joy of the priesthood, the joy of the Mass. I know that many of you are missing so much the ability to receive Holy Communion, and I so much understand that, it is a terrible loss. It had never really occurred to me how much I would miss being able to place the Lord into your hands, into your mouths. I cannot wait for the day when I can do this once more. I celebrate Mass for you every day (except, of course, tomorrow) but I so much want to celebrate Mass with you

But of course, however extraordinary the circumstances in which we are living may be, we know that God's love and power are more extraordinary still. He will overcome all the obstacles that lie before us, and he will help us to build something beautiful for the future. He will even give us gifts that we would not otherwise have had. We will have a deeper longing for all that we have been missing; we will have a deeper understanding of the things that are really important to us, the things that look big in the light of eternity, and those that don't. And we will have a stronger sense that we all belong together – just as the apostles did on that first Holy Thursday when the shock of something so new gave way to the understanding that they had witnessed the world shifting on its axis. May the Lord fill us all with his grace on this most extraordinary day.