

Homily for Holy Thursday 2018

The world looks different from your knees. Nowadays, perhaps, many people seldom see it. All sorts of gadgets and labour-saving devices mean that we don't need to kneel down to clean and mend and examine things as much as we used to. We might need to kneel in front of some important person, but that doesn't happen very often. We might kneel to pray, but we can also pray standing or sitting. There are not many times in the liturgy of the Church that kneeling is required, but tonight is one of them. Kneeling is, in itself, quite a disorientating thing to do. People look different when you are kneeling; you always have to look up at people when you are kneeling, they are always above you. You are rather restricted in what you can see, because it is hard to turn without losing your balance, so you are less aware of what is going on around you (but perhaps therefore more aware of what is going on in front of you). It is difficult to move fast when you are kneeling, because you must either shuffle from knee to knee, or get to your feet before moving, and neither is designed for speed. So kneeling is strange and disorientating. All of us need to stand at times, to sit at times, to lie down at times, but we seldom need to kneel. Today is an exception because the priest (unless he is very infirm) MUST kneel, there is no other way, and the kneeling priest is a sign of the kneeling Church. The priest on his knees tells us something about the nature of the priesthood, which is instituted tonight, and also something about the nature of the Church.

On the night when Christ instituted the priesthood, and celebrated for the first time the Holy Eucharist, he knelt. Eucharist, priesthood, Church, all these require, by their very nature, some element of service, of self-gift, of extraordinary generosity that finds its roots in the life of God. This charity, this service, is indiscriminate, too. It is not based solely on satisfying the needs of people who we know and like, or people who can do something for us in return. Pope Benedict once explained that this charity does not start from a sense of fellow-feeling, or shared humanity, it begins in a very different place. The love and service that Christ requires of his followers begins in a relationship of intimacy with God. That is why the command of service rightly finds its place within the first celebration of the Eucharist. If we allow ourselves to enter into a deep intimacy with God, if we allow him to invade and subdue the fortress of our own passions, our own rebelliousness, our own prejudices and fears and insecurities, if we allow every rampart to tumble before the siege of his love, then we can begin to see the world differently: we can begin to see people not through the lens of our own likes and dislikes, our own doubts and anxieties, but we begin to see them through the eyes of Christ, we see them as he sees them.

For a priest to be truly a priest, for a Christian to be truly a Christian, for the Church to be truly the Church, we need to see the people around us as Christ sees them. He looks at them with deep compassion, strong friendship, great hope. This beautiful liturgy tonight reminds us that an encounter with the living Christ and the Church's ministry of service are inextricably linked. In the Mass we experience the great love of God, and we are caught up into that love so that we become channels through which it flows out to others. In every sense, it drives us to our knees. The hands that take the sacred chalice must always also be the hands that wash the feet. The French writer Leon Bloy once wrote that if we fail this test, if receiving the Eucharist does not drive us to a life of charity, then 'the sacred Host we

have consumed, rather than nourishing us, will become within us like a bomb exploding our hypocrisy to high heaven.'

Charity that is based on a realisation of our common humanity is, of course, a good thing: it makes peoples' lives better. But the Christian way is different. Having fallen in love with Christ, we do as any lover does: we love the people and the things that he loves, we want the things that he wants. His will becomes our will. And so the generosity that gives himself for the life of the world is no longer simply something we look at with admiration from outside, it becomes our way too. Gradually, as we learn to trust more and more the one we love, we let our defences fall. Every great tower of pride and fear, every strong wall of timidity and self-importance, comes crashing down, until we find ourselves on our knees beside him, washing as he washes, caring as he cares. Pope Benedict has a beautiful phrase to help us see the goal to which this leads us:

"Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave." (Deus Caritas Est n.18)