

FIRST IMPRESSIONS HOLY THURSDAY

Exodus 12: 1-8, 11-14 Psalm 116 1Cor. 11: 23-26 John 13: 1-15

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The gospel has been moving irreversibly towards the moment John calls “the hour.” Now, in today’s selection from the Last Supper, he tells us that Jesus is fully aware “his hour had come.” All of this gospel has been preparing us for this moment: Jesus is entering final moments of his life and as promised, we are about to see his glory. We who are gathered together this evening are entering the Triduum, the three sacred days of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection. We are hearing the stories that are the foundation of our faith and, through them, entering Jesus’ “hour” with him – we are remembering and experiencing God’s profound love for us.

We know this story well. It comes each and every Holy Thursday. Unlike most other Sundays and feasts, we do not have a three-year cycle of readings for today – these are the same passages we get each year we celebrate this feast. We have to be careful not to be lulled by the familiar; after all, these stories are not merely a repetition of oft-told tales – through them we hear the Word of God proclaimed anew for this day in our lives. Jesus’ “hour” is ours as well. Hearing the gospel again we watch and allow him to wash our feet. For, as he tells the over-zealous Peter, “Whoever has bathed has no need except to have his [her] feet washed, for that one is clean all over....”

We have bathed, been baptized into Jesus’ life, death and resurrections. We believe that through Jesus, death does not have the final word – life does. So, as we gather this evening for the washing of the feet we recall Jesus’ words and once again put our trust in the seed of life he has planted in us. He is alive in us and we are growing more and more into his disciples. But we are not yet fully his disciples, for we have not completely accepted and walked in his ways, so we need to let Jesus wash our feet. We may not need to be bathed again, but we do need Jesus to wash our feet.

We let him wash our feet because he is adamant about doing it, “Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me.” We have inherited his life, not in some abstract way. Rather, concrete signs of his life must show themselves

through our lives. What has been given us must be shared with others, otherwise, in truth, we have not accepted the gift of life Jesus won for us this week. At the meal with his disciples Jesus shows us how we can share his life with others, by washing their feet; by taking on the role of servant for life-weary travelers. We welcome those worn out by their journey, especially those who have had life pile on heavy burdens and those who are displaced, with no place to rest. We welcome them in and nourish them at table and wash their feet – just as Jesus did.

Besides washing the feet of his disciples, we know what else Jesus did at this meal – he instituted the Eucharist. The Synoptic gospels tell the details of the institution, each in its own way. Like us, the earliest readers of John's gospel would be well versed in the eucharistic narrative. They would not only be familiar with the written accounts; they would have been celebrating Eucharist together for several decades. Most of them, like us, could recite Jesus' words by heart, "This is my body...this is the cup of my blood...do this in memory of me." Those words echo in our memories – especially the last command, "Do this in memory of me."

John knew those who heard his account would recall Jesus' words which instituted the Eucharist. He knew too we would hear the echoes from the Synoptics, about remembering Jesus. John has similar words in his account, "as I have done for you, you should also do." In other words, "Do this in memory of me." So, we ask, "How should we remember Jesus?" Is it by celebrating Eucharist together? "Yes," John would respond, "But also remember what else Jesus did at supper that night, he washed our feet." If we want to celebrate Eucharist, not only in worship, but in daily life, we must give our body and blood, our lives, the way Jesus did and "wash one another's feet."

I have spent this Lent preaching retreats in parishes. Those parishes vary in economic resources, ethnicity, races, geography, liturgical styles, etc. Still, I have seen disciples wash feet of other parishioners and of strangers. Nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ, they have remembered him by their humble service to others: working two jobs to get their children through school; driving elderly and sick members to church; collecting food and clothing for the poor; providing information and counseling for immigrants; taking teenagers on Spring break to repair homes in Appalachia, etc.

We are renewed in our baptismal identity at this Eucharist. We are those called to remember Christ, the One who forgives our sins again and gives us himself, food

in abundance. Now we can be ready to offer loving service to others in his name. Some religious communities take as their emblem the towel and wash basin, a visual reminder of their call. Actually, the towel and washbasin, like the cross, is just another reminder to all Christians what we celebrate this day and at each Eucharist: Christ came to serve and give his life for others. After we have received the Body and Blood of the Lord tonight and had our feet washed, then we are sent on our mission, to wash the feet of others.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, *"People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."* If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Daniel Cummings #0095279 (On death row since 12/16/94)
- Marvin E. Williams #0443375 (1/25/95)
- Jerry W. Connor #0085045 (4/30/91)

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",
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