

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” HOLY THURSDAY
Exodus 12: 1-8, 11-14 1Cor. 11: 23-26 John 13: 1-15

Dear Preachers:

Chapter 13 in John brings a major shift in this gospel. It closes the first part called “the Book of Signs”, the account of Jesus’ public ministry. Now we enter the second half of the gospel, called the Book of Glory (chps. 13-17). The word “love” is a key word in this section: Jesus will call his disciples to love and will show them the kind of love he has in mind by offering himself for them. The grain of wheat will die and bear much fruit, as he predicted (5th. Sunday of Lent). The opening verse of this section (13:1) links the final hours of Jesus’ life with the Passover. (Hence the choice of the first reading from Exodus, the account of the origins of the Passover. Jesus will die at the hour the Passover lambs are slaughtered for sacrifice in the Temple.) There is something about what is going to happen to Jesus, his long-awaited “hour”, that is going to complete the meaning of the Passover. The blood of the lamb painted on the lintels of their doors saved the Jews from the angel of death. The blood of this Lamb is going to save all from the death that sin has caused. Jesus isn’t just setting a good example for us as he washes his disciples feet; what he is initiating from this point on in the gospel will save us from the pervasive power of sin over our lives.

Foot washings were a part of hospitality in this culture. The roads were dusty and guests coming for a visit or meal would welcome the chance to have the dust from the road washed from their feet. Normally the washing would have been done before the meal and was the task of the youngest or lowliest servant or slave. The importance of the event is underscored by Jesus’ breaking the pattern of what was customary and acceptable: he interrupts the meal and does the washings himself. His final hour is at hand, and he is already emptying himself. His dying has begun; our new life is about to begin. In fact, a sign of the community’s new life brought about by Jesus’ action will be that they will be “foot-washers”, servants to the needy among them. But much more is implied by his actions.

Peter objects to Jesus’ humiliation in front of his disciples, he does not want his feet washed. But Peter is no dummy. Maybe he also sees what is implied in Jesus’ actions: if the Master is doing this then Peter may already suspect that the disciples will have to do likewise—himself included. Jesus insists that if Peter is to have any part in his inheritance, he must allow Jesus to wash his feet. And sure, enough he

learns that the “inheritance” will include washing the feet of others, being a lowly servant in the household where Jesus dwells. However, he will not be required to have a total bath again. As the disciple travels through life in the world, he/she picks up soil from the road. A full bath (another baptism?) is not necessary; but a washing is. We can be washed from our sins and refreshed and renewed as we sit down to the table with other disciples to eat the Passover meal of Jesus.

John is writing for a community like our own who, since their baptism, have many things from which they need cleansing. This account is encouraging for the community members who have failed, as Peter did, to live up to their Christian calling. After he betrayed Jesus, Peter must have been heartened by his remembrance of this incident, and the possibility Jesus holds out to be washed from the soil of the road. Since the incident also took place at the table, the suggestion is that forgiveness is offered us through the meal we share in remembrance of Jesus. In our Eucharist, the first thing we do is ask for forgiveness of our failings. It’s as if each eucharistic meal begins with a foot washing. And we are the grateful recipients as we are reminded that what Jesus did for Peter, he does for us.

Thus, there is another way we can imitate the example of the One we call “teacher and master.” We can follow the example he set for us. Besides the call to service, so evident in the foot washing, another response Jesus may be asking of us tonight is to forgive one another as he has forgiven us. Since the ritual will be performed in many places of worship this day, we may want to look around at who else is present at the table with us and wash their feet by forgiving them what we hold against them.

QUOTABLE:

This passion narrative is read in the liturgy every year on Good Friday, but not without context; for the Johannine Gospel is read daily in the preceding three weeks of Lent and throughout the subsequent Easter Season. Such a context is important for understanding the passion since the Jesus who comes at last to his hour (Jn 13:1) in the Fourth Gospel is a different dramatic character from the Jesus of the Synoptic passion narratives. He is a Jesus conscious of his pre-existence. Through death, therefore, he is returning to a state he has temporarily left during his stay in this world (17:5). He is not a victim at the mercy of his opponents since he has freely chosen to lay down his life with the utter certitude that he will take it

up again (1:17-18). If there is an element of struggle in the passion, it is a struggle without suspense, for the Satanic prince of this world has no power over Jesus (14:30); indeed, Jesus has already conquered the world (16:33). Since the Johannine Jesus is omniscient (2: 25; 6:6, etc.), he cannot be caught off guard by what will happen in the passion. He had chosen Judas knowing that Judas was going to betray him (6: 70-71) and he himself sent Judas off on his evil mission (13: 27-30).

—Raymond Brown in, *A CRUCIFIED CHRIST IN HOLY WEEK: ESSAYS ON THE FOUR GOSPEL PASSION NARRATIVES*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1986, page 57.

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“Blessings on your preaching”,
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