

Holy Thursday

There are three great themes to Holy Thursday –Passover, Eucharist and service. Passover recalls the Jewish people who celebrate their ‘passing over’ from slavery to freedom, remembering the wonders of God who set his people free from the forces of darkness and captivity. Exodus gives us this sense of drama and urgency as the people eat the Passover and sprinkle the doorposts with blood so that they will be spared by the Lord. It is dramatic and urgent because their day of salvation and liberation was near at hand. God has heard the cry of his people from the captivity of Egypt and God promises to set them free.

When Jesus gathers in the upper room with his disciples, he takes bread and wine and says to the disciples, ‘This is my body, this is my blood’. Jesus gives his disciples the gift of the Eucharist. Here Jesus celebrates his Passover, preparing to set the world free by his death on the cross. Bread broken and wine poured out puts us in touch with the reality of his body broken, his blood poured out for the salvation of all. Jesus has been alerting his disciples to the reality of the cross and now the drama intensifies. In the confusion and drama of the moment, Jesus leaves his disciples with a few key words that will all make sense after his resurrection, ‘Do this in memory of me’. From now on, when the disciples gather to celebrate the Eucharist and Jesus is no longer physically present among them, they will take bread and wine, they will do this in memory of Jesus, in their celebration making present the reality of Holy Week. The Risen Lord will be with them in a very different way.

But before all this takes place, we hear about something only contained in John’s Gospel. Jesus steps away from the table and washes the feet of the apostles. Jesus ties together Eucharist and service, dying to self and rising again. True discipleship is not just about eating and drinking in a secret room; true discipleship is about embracing the cross, dying with him, service towards our brothers and sisters. Tonight’s celebration puts us in touch with these three mighty elements of our story of faith. We celebrate the Passover and are set free from captivity, from slavery, just like the people in Exodus. We are the disciples of Jesus who take bread and wine in our hands, bread broken and wine poured out, in fulfillment of his command ‘Do this in memory of me’. We are the ones called to imitate the master who steps away from the table in order to stoop down and wash feet, in order to serve. The washing of the feet only happens once a year but it is meant to symbolize our daily lives of Christian witness and service ... and to be reminded of the stern words of Jesus to Peter, ‘If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me’.

Pope Francis keeps repeating almost on a weekly basis to bishops, to priests and to the lay faithful in the Church – we are all called to serve! Your brother or

sister in need reveals the face of Christ and loving them, serving them, healing them, being compassionate to them, bandaging up their wounds and giving of our time is the essence of pastoral ministry and the fundamental call of baptism. As far as Pope Francis is concerned, if we do not serve with love and joy, then we have no business to call ourselves Christians.

As we gather this evening to celebrate the Eucharist, we are called to imitate Jesus. We hear that call to discipleship and service, we carry the cross and die with him, we know our darkness and captivity and celebrate that great gift of God who sets his people free. As we long for freedom, forgiveness, true life and hope, let us enter into these days with a great spirit of prayer in order to rise with him, renewed and transformed on Easter Sunday.