

## ***Walk in the light of the cross***

### ***A reflection for Holy Week***



The week after next we begin Holy Week. If we let ourselves be taken on this journey, the Holy Week liturgies we are soon to enter, lead us through a most profound experience. Liturgy is meant to touch us deeply. It speaks into our lives and engages us at that very point where all that is most deeply human and Divine meet. In the ritual we find God's story entering our own. Where that takes us will depend on how fully we let ourselves be touched and become swept up in the 'drama'. During Holy Week we begin with Passion Sunday or Palm Sunday and we journey through Holy Thursday and Good Friday, into the Holy Saturday vigil and the joy of Easter Sunday

The Holy Thursday liturgy, along with that of Good Friday, is surely the most moving of all in the Church's rich liturgical cycle, for there we walk into the light of the cross. We are touched on so many levels. We come to this liturgy knowing that we are going to remember a night on which Love was given to us in an extraordinary way. The story of the cross which we will tell the next day begins there in that hushed and sacred moment of Holy Thursday as we tell its story.

There are, in fact, two Holy Thursday stories, both of them expressing that one Great Love: Jesus breaking the bread and Jesus washing the disciples' feet. As the liturgy unfolds we go through a range of emotions: that last meal of Jesus and his disciples is beautifully intimate and tender, and yet shot through with a sadness and a foreboding of what is to come. We know that those two profound gestures of love and self-giving will be followed by fear and anguish, surrender to God in the darkness of the garden of Gethsemane, condemnation, violence and

brutality, loneliness, unbelievable pain, and another final surrender on the cross. And after we tell those two stories, and we ourselves are fed and embraced by that Great Love, the liturgy ends with the silence of the vigil at the altar of repose. (For those unfamiliar with Catholic liturgy, at the end of the Holy Thursday Eucharist, the 'Blessed Sacrament', that is, the bread now become the Body of Christ, is taken in procession, usually out of the church, or to a side altar, and placed in what is called 'the altar of repose'.) For those who choose to remain there in prayer this is a time to kneel beside Him, with Him, watching and waiting.



I would like to offer some thoughts about those two Holy Thursday stories and in particular reflect on where they call us to be. In the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, this last meal of Jesus and his disciples centres on the account of Jesus taking bread and wine, giving thanks to God for these gifts in the customary Jewish manner, and then doing something surprising. He broke the bread and passed it around and said: 'This is my body, given for you'. He took the cup of wine and passed that around and said: 'Drink from this, for this is the cup of my blood which will be poured out for you'. The three Gospel texts are almost the same, except that in Luke's account there is the explicit command, 'Do this in memory of me'. However, when we read John's Gospel we find something different. John has no account of Jesus breaking bread and sharing the cup of wine. Instead he has Jesus wash the feet of those at the table with him. Again Jesus took his friends by surprise. In our Holy Thursday liturgy those two stories are there together, as indeed they are in the thinking of Christians – they have become part of the one meal. Let's look more deeply at these two stories and let them speak to us. In both these stories the disciples are loved and ministered to by Jesus, and then told to do the same, and it is that same 'movement' of being embraced and sent out, that we are drawn into on Holy Thursday, and that is at the heart of our lives as Christians.



In first century Palestine it was the place of the servants in a household to wash the feet of the guests when they entered the house. The roads were dusty and for the most part people walked everywhere. Washing their feet was a sign of hospitality, service, respect and simple good manners. But it was a servant's job. No wonder Peter was horrified when Jesus knelt down and began to wash their feet: 'Lord, you will never wash my feet!' he said. But Jesus had two things for Peter, for all of them gathered there that night, and for all of us. And what he did and said turned their ordered world upside down. Their religious world was one in which everyone knew their place: there were holy people and sinners; there were those who observed the Law and those who didn't; the holy people had high status, and the sinners were looked down upon and judged. Just remember the story of the Pharisee standing at the front of the Temple, proclaiming loudly how grateful he was that he wasn't like the sinner, the publican, humbly standing at the back, beating his breast. Or James and John, the sons of Zebedee, expecting privilege and glory in following Jesus, asking for a place one at his right hand and the other at his left. But Jesus had something quite different for them all, and that night he modelled it for them. He loved them tenderly, and so he knelt before them and served them. And he told them to do the same. He loved them so deeply that he fed them with himself, utterly given, broken for all, and shared. And he told them to do the same.

In these two 'movements' of these two beautiful stories, we have the interplay of our inner life, our relationship with Jesus, and our outer life, our mission in the world. That foot washing scene is incredibly tender and intimate. While feet are tough and hardy, it is a rather personal gesture to touch someone's feet or indeed to have someone touch and wash your feet. In that kneeling before us and in that washing of our feet, Jesus comes to us, right where we are, in our need, our exhaustion, our struggles, wherever our darkness is. He enters the deeply personal and intimate places within. He washes away the dust from our lives. If we were to close our

eyes and see that scene, place ourselves there, and feel Jesus kneeling at our feet, feel the coolness of that water and the touch of his hand ... I think we get a sense of what it is to be tenderly cared for. This is where we are made whole, washed, tended with care. Like Peter, we may be resistant at first, but Jesus made it clear to him, and to us, that this is where we are to go – into intimacy with Him. And then we are to do the same. We are to turn our expectations of who's who in the status game upside down. We are to kneel and serve. 'If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you' (John 13:14).

'Kneeling' before others is to place ourselves in a particular relationship with them. Contrary to some ways of seeing this, it is not subservience or an expression of lower status or grovelling of any kind, or begging for mercy – and these are just some of the associations we may have with the idea of kneeling before someone. It is not about being used or abused, being 'a doormat' as the saying goes. It is about being in what we might look upon as the most authentic relationship we can have with others. Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche communities, is a deeply humble man who has devoted his life to being with and loving people with disabilities, and in his book, *The Broken Body*, he speaks of the need to go 'down the ladder', to be with the poor, to be where there is need. The language we most consistently hear in our world, however, is about climbing 'up the ladder'. Vanier's words can therefore be quite confronting. But this is the consistent message of the Gospel. Our dignity, our status if you like, is found in serving. Our greatness is found in kneeling. I think this is what has made our current pope, Francis I, so immediately appealing: his first public act was to bow before the world.

And then we have the other beautiful story, the story of feeding. This too is an intimate act. It is the first thing we do with a newborn baby – we hold it close and feed it. Eating together is a communal act and something that draws us together. But to be fed is deeply personal and suggests intimacy and tenderness. 'This is my body, broken and given for you. Take and eat'. 'This is my blood poured out for you. Take and drink'. And this is what is done to us, and for us, every time we open our hands to receive Holy Communion. The feeding that happens there brings transformation. As Saint Augustine said: 'You will not change me into yourself as you would food of your flesh; but you will be changed into me'.

As Jesus, kneeling at the feet of his disciples sends them out to do the same, so does Jesus, broken and given to us, send us out to be broken, shared out, given to the world too. What if we turn those words around and we ourselves say them to Him: 'Lord, this is *my* body, given for you'. What might this do for you and where might it take you? Here am I, willing to serve, to give, to be nourishment and life. Here am I, willing to go where life is desperately needed, willing to go where I may not otherwise choose to go. Here am I, willing to let go, so that I may indeed be broken and shared out, given for the life of the world.

To many people this may seem frightening. Jesus invites us into something that defies the logic of self-preservation. To many it will certainly seem illogical and without reason, and in fact, to some, just plain foolish. The French philosopher, Blaise Pascal said: 'The heart has reasons which reason does not know'. To move in the way Jesus calls us to, requires of us a kind of absurd logic, certainly contrary to the way of the world. Mother Teresa once called it 'the absurd logic of love'. To love like this does ask us to turn things upside down! Evolutionary Biology tells us of that powerful thrust towards self-preservation and survival that has directed the unfolding of life on this planet and has accounted for many of the twists and turns in that story. But love asks us to do just the opposite. Rather than self-preservation, we are invited into self-giving. We need only think of the love we have for our children and what that elicits from us, or the love that leads people to live in voluntary poverty, or the many, many paths of self-sacrifice of those who truly love others.

In a world that proclaims the glory of power, money, fame, good fortune, position, title, authority and control, the God we encounter in our Holy Thursday liturgy is a God who does what a servant does, and that is the exact opposite of what the world expects or desires. The glory is humility. The glory is service. Jesus did not say that to love is *like* washing another's feet; he did it. As we watch that scene unfold we see a deliberate choice made: he got up from the table, he took off his outer garment, he tied a towel around his waist, he knelt down. He prepared himself and went to it mindfully, purposefully. He met and attended to each one. As Jean Vanier says: "Love doesn't mean doing extraordinary or heroic things. It means knowing how to do ordinary things with tenderness" (Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*). And from our own Mary Ward we have these beautiful words: "I will do these things with love or I will let them alone".



The danger in our very busy lives today perhaps resides in over-emphasizing the doing, the giving. Much of our daily life is about doing for others. We have commitments, people to care

for and things to be done. I'm sure each of you reading this will be able to say, 'I know how to serve'. But that is not enough. Pope Francis, when he was Archbishop, said that the Church without Jesus is a compassionate NGO. The same is true of us! Holy Thursday's great word to us is to come to the One who is waiting to embrace us, waiting to speak Love and tenderness into our very being, to touch us at our deepest centre of need where we all long to be known and loved.

It probably comes a lot easier to us to imagine *ourselves* at the feet of Jesus. But this week, imagine Jesus *at your feet*. It is probably easier to hear Jesus say to you, 'This is my body given for you'. But this week, say to Him, '*This is my body, given for you*'.

After he had washed their feet, Jesus asked those at the table: 'Do you realize what I have done for you?'

'Do you realize what I have done for you?' Jesus asks each one of us today.

And so to Good Friday, where the cross in all its pain and in all its life-giving power looms large. The following reflection is taken from, *In the Light of the Cross*, by Christopher Ryan mgl. This book is a collection of reflections on the Australian journey of the World Youth Day Cross and Icon in 2008. In this little excerpt Christopher Ryan reflects on his experience of the World Youth Day Cross when it was taken to Jamberoo Abbey during its journey around Australia:

"After some time we came into the beautiful darkened abbey church, lit only with candles, their light flickering and briefly illuminating the wood of the cross. The Celts have a marvelous expression for places like Jamberoo. They call them the 'thin places' of the world, where it seems that the veil between heaven and earth is all but transparent, where God seems very near, and finding God seems easy. If you ask the nuns they will no doubt tell you that God can hide his face there just as well as anywhere else, but there are some places in the world – and, for me, Jamberoo is one of them – where it seems possible to drink in God as you drink in the silence of the place. I am sure it has something to do with the way in which a place becomes consecrated, set apart for God, holy, as it soaks up the prayers of the people who come there.



As I joined the sisters for a small part of their vigil with the cross, I was reminded of the ritual that Benedict required for all who wanted to enter a monastery. The postulant (literally, 'one who asks') was to stand outside the monastery and knock on the door. The abbot or abbess was to ask the postulant, 'What do you seek?' The only answer that Benedict would accept to this question was 'God'. Kneeling in the darkness before the Cross, I was reminded once again that we are made for God, and that nothing less than God will do for us. We are, as St Augustine famously pointed out, restless until our hearts rest in God. This was the fruit of Augustine's own experience. He knew first-hand that all our seeking, indeed all human searching, finds its fulfillment only in God".

Our Good Friday story is just that. It is the story of ultimate surrender to, and into, God. As we come to the Good Friday liturgy let us ask ourselves that same question: "What do you seek?" And let us dare to answer: "God". On that Friday so long ago, Jesus did what he had done all his life. He let God be God in his life. And at that moment, he did it in the darkness of pain and death, the ultimate unknown. Whether we participate in the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday morning, or the Passion of Jesus at 3:00 in the afternoon, or both, this is what is offered to us: the way of the cross, the way of trust and surrender. We are invited to surrender to the Love that is God, to let that Love speak into our hearts, our minds and our lives, our choices, our direction. We are asked to take this into our world, to love and serve, to do as He did. We are invited to surrender to the Love that is God, the Love that will never abandon us, whether we walk in the light or in the darkness of pain and death. These words, by Denise Levertov, capture beautifully this movement of surrender:

"As swimmers dare  
to lie face to the sky  
and water bears them,  
as hawks rest upon air  
and air sustains them,  
so would I learn to attain  
freefall, and float  
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,  
knowing no effort earns  
that all-surrounding grace".  
'The Avowal' by Denise Levertov

What a wonderful expression! *Attain freefall*. The cross invites us to this. An obvious instrument of death, yet it is the ultimate invitation to life. It invites us to surrender. And on Easter Sunday we celebrate that with great joy! As is proclaimed in the Catholic Mass, in the Preface of the Eucharistic Prayer II, "He opened his arms on the cross ... and revealed the resurrection". Resurrection, God's ultimate 'yes' to a life lived in utter surrender to God.

So what a feast awaits us in Holy Week! May this be a holy time for you, and may you be blessed with the riches of God's grace.

*Ms Kerry McCullough*

*Spirituality and Liturgy Coordinator*