

Homily - Holy Thursday 2024

This is my body, given up for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

Some words, when we say them, or when we hear them, change the course of our lives forever.

Joyful or sorrowful news.

Words of acceptance or rejection.

Words of commitment, spoken by ourselves or another, which shape and direct the course of our existence from that day forward.

For the apostles, and for the entirety of the Church, the words of Christ at his Last Supper would redefine their lives in the most profound ways.

Today, Holy Thursday, in these first hours of the Paschal Triduum, the Church celebrates and gives thanks for a twofold gift.

The first gift, prefigured and foreshadowed throughout salvation history and the Lord's own ministry, was nothing less than the gift of Himself.

Not as his apostles knew him, but in a way which would allow him to be present to all his disciples, throughout time and history.

He gave himself to us in his Body and Blood in the Holy Eucharist, a mystical but real and true presence by which he could not only renew the hearts of his faithful, but even transform them from within to resemble himself and continue his saving ministry.

This was a gift that was bought at an immeasurable price.

The first Passover, celebrated on a night of hope and darkness by the captive Israelite nation, was marked by the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb, whose blood would stand between their people and the Lord's descending wrath.

The signs of that feast would now be brought to fulfillment.

Jesus Christ, the unblemished Lamb of God, the perfect and holy Son of the Father and promised Messiah, would allow his own blood to be shed once for all.

Nothing forced him to do this - nothing except for love.

"He loved his own in the world," writes John, "and he loved them to the end."

The Eucharist is a sign of that love, and more - it is an encounter with love incarnate, strengthening and forming us in that same virtue, so that we may love as Christ himself has loved us, even to the Cross.

Everything we believe about this sacrament and our life of worship as Catholics is ordered around this truth: that Christ is present for us here in his Body and Blood, and that in this sacred presence he desires to make us like himself, ready to give everything out of pure and unwavering charity.

However, as I said, this was in fact a twofold gift.

To bring this gift to his Church, Christ also gave us ministers.

With that commission - to do as he had done, in his memory - Jesus instituted the priesthood, ministers in whom he would continue to live and act to re-present this great sacrifice from that day on until the end of time.

The apostles, set aside as the first presbyters of the Church, would hand this ministry on to their successors, passing down this same gift into our own time.

These two gifts we receive and celebrate today, the priesthood and the Eucharist, are more than an abstract ideal for which to be thankful.

They come with a call to action, an invitation to live with the same sacrificial love which Christ himself models for us as he sets out on the way of the Cross.

And as Our Lord taught us, this call to charity is likewise a call to humility and service.

In washing his disciples' feet, Jesus makes it clear that no Christian is ever so far above another to withhold that gift of love.

In fact, it is all the more beautiful that it is his own friends and disciples whom Jesus loves in this humble way.

One of the Fathers of the Church, Origen of Alexandria, reflects that in this gesture, "By washing... He made beautiful the feet of those who were to preach glad tidings."

In serving us and coming to be with us in the most humble form, Our Lord prepares us to do just as he did.

In our own lives, we are surrounded by people the Lord is calling us to love, just as he loved.

Some of them are very close to us - family members and companions whom we see day after day, who are as familiar to us as our own selves.

Some are more difficult to love, difficult to redeem in our minds and hearts, and resistant to every act or word of charity.

And some, to us, may resemble the persecutors and betrayers who would strike and mock Christ himself, rejecting him even after he had offered them his friendship.

Jesus was willing to die for each of them.

He was willing to wash their feet if they would allow him, to love them in total humility.

Who are we to do any less for our brothers and sisters?

To live this kind of sacrificial love would be an impossible task on its face, except - except for those gifts: the gifts of his sacraments, through which Jesus himself still lives and acts in us and through us.

Through his Body and Blood, renewing us and restoring his image in our hearts, repairing our woundedness through his mercy, and setting us back on apostolic mission to carry him with us into the world.

As the sacred days of the Triduum continue, we will learn again firsthand what this gift cost him, and how much our own redemption was worth.

We will witness the sacrificial lamb of this Passover offered up as a pure and unblemished sacrifice, for the love of the Father and the salvation of the world.

And in the end, he will invite us to do as he did, to serve as he served and love as he loved, even to the point of death.