

Holy Thursday Homily, April 9, 2020

By Fr. Tito

The beginning of the Holy Triduum, the 3 days, the first day is the day of promise, the 2nd day is the day of Sacrifice, and the 3rd day is the day of Silence. Yet all of these days contain all 3 realities which flow one into another. There is only one beginning and one end, because it is one Holy Liturgy.

Every parish in the world, every parish in which I have served, city or suburb, large or small, whether people spoke English or Spanish or Polish or Tagalog or Italian or German, the final half hour before Holy Thursday, the 1st night, for ministers was always laden with intensity, passion, activity, and enthusiasm! Putting all of the pieces together is both exciting and stressful. Where are the towels, the bowls, is that water warm enough for footwashing? Did you put out enough hosts and communion bread for tomorrow too, and wine? Who took the purificators? Where is the Ordo? O, is he late again! Where is the lectionary? Who is carrying the Chrism oil? They said they're changing the route of the procession to the altar of repose! Make sure you use the right incense and open the windows for those who are allergic. Whewwww. Everyone in the pews is equally joyful, conversing with each other, saving seats, seeing old friends, gleefully anticipating this opening night of Ritual, community, prayer and song. Wheww, ok, let's begin... The Oil of the Sick... "O Redeemer, hear our singing, as we praise you with one voice... I sure miss it all, and know all of you also ache in your hearts to live the moment again.

It was hard enough not having our procession with palms and the proclamation of the Passion, but this absence is deeply felt. However, on this night which we celebrate the Institution of the Eucharist, the real presence of Christ, we know we are not alone. Jesus is with us as he promised.

We lean on, in our First Scripture from Exodus, the foundational experience of Israel being set free from the Pharaoh. In our COVID environment we feel like the people trapped in Egypt – stay with that feeling these 3 days and allow ourselves to be freed, saved, and raised up in Christ. Think of prisoners all over the world trapped in cells with many others who may be test COVID positive. And the refugees in camps, some for years. In a sense, we are in good company. A taste of their lives makes us feel compassion and humbles us that we would move toward eucharistein, thanksgiving.

No longer would the people Israel live to serve a mortal king in Egypt, but from this point forward they will serve only God. And for us, today, God is all that remains. Our other institutions and activities are gone. Their slavery like a bitter herb in Egypt stripped away their dignity, but with Exodus now they would regain their worth and value as God's chosen people. The Passover Meal marks a "perpetual institution" for generations to come. They were blessed through their obedience to God's word in the meal, in attitude, and in their behavior. They spread "blood of the lamb" on the doorposts signaling their identity as God's own people worth saving. They return thanks to God for many blessings in this meal.

Where is our meal tonight? Maybe you will have a special meal with your immediate family, or alone because of social distancing. We crave spiritual food when earthly food only partially satisfies.

But we are starving people, our hands are empty, our souls vacant for the Eucharist. And in a paradoxical sense - that is a good for us. We feel the spiritual hunger pains of not having been able to celebrate at Mass for weeks and weeks more to come. Learn of the spiritual hunger, recover the childlike reverence as on First Communion Day. Long to receive the Risen Christ as we "recognize" him in the breaking of the bread, the story of our Passover, the new Passover Jesus Christ. We read in John's Gospel, Chapter 13 tonight: "Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to **pass** from this world to the Father." Jesus knew he was beginning the final steps of his journey to return to God from whom he came. And as he passes, he saves with his blood, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Wonderful, beautiful! He swoops up our sin as he passes over.

We also reach back into John's Gospel, Chapter 6, which is the base of his teaching of his eternal presence with them. The Bread of Life discourse is where he reveals his power to not only multiply the loaves, but to continue to reflect with the crowds and the disciples his real presence as food and drink. He tells them "not to work for the food that perishes but that which endures for eternal life." And further: "the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives LIFE to the world – unlike the manna. They want it, but cannot believe. Jesus makes piercing, bold statements in reply which cause a stormburst of reaction from the crowds. He says three, in particular which stand out:

- 1) (35) "I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never hunger, whoever believes in me will never die." But they murmured as they heard HE came down from heaven, he is just a carpenter!
- 2) He continues repeating: (48) I am the bread of life! (51) I am the living bread that came down from heaven. They quarreled – how can he give us flesh!!! He does not back down, he does not imply a metaphor like the vine and branches. He **is** food – heavenly food!!
- 3) (53) Amen, Amen, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life. (55) My flesh is true food, my blood is true drink and whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in you! They reacted: this saying is hard! Who can accept it. (this was said in a synagogue in Carparnaum – Jewish people didn't eat meat with blood in it, they never drank blood of animals!!

Brothers and sisters this teaching from the beginning has been an obstacle! Jesus said to the murmuring disciples "Does this shock you?" Does this intense teaching shock us over 2000 years later? It may challenge us, we may find it hard to live in mystery and yet through the centuries from the early 2nd century writers on through many Church councils. From doctors of the church like St Catherine of Sienna, Thomas Aquinas, saints like Juliana, Margaret Mary, Tarcissus, Pope Paul VI, etc. were deeply united to this real presence which we celebrate tonight, Holy Thursday.

Finally, a pivot point verse gives us a dose of reality Jn 6.66 – "As a result of this MANY of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him." Jesus never softened his teaching, always purifying their belief to force the decision point. "So he said to the twelve: 'Do you also want to leave?'" Peter's words hopefully are our words: "Master to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. WE have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

We have made a decision even though many others decide to leave. We are here, we remain faithful.

This is what we celebrate at every Liturgy, at every Mass, this is who we are. This is what we believe. Once this belief is the bedrock of our lives, then what Jesus

does and says in the Gospel tonight makes sense. Here are the most familiar, comforting and ever challenging words:

"He rose from supper...and began to wash the disciple's feet. He said "do you realize what I have done for you?... If I, therefore the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do." If we get the meaning of the real presence of the Eucharist, then our service will not be empty. It will be driven through Him, with Him and in Him! The work in hospitals, nursing homes, senior homes, as we speak with brave medical personnel and support service people who cook, clean, do laundry for the sick. Our first responders on the front lines willing to die – many have already died. Our farmers, delivery people, restaurant workers, factory workers, grocery store and lab workers also risking to work to keep us fed and cared for.

Let us consider seriously our response to Jesus' teaching. The parents, moms and dads, grandparents, living at home 24 for hours a day, 7 days a week with children, teens and other adults under one roof – patience people! All the works of justice continue- gun control, justice for immigrants at the border, fair legislation and community advocacy. To bring all of those actions into focus as Christ's work is our work as WE ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST!

Just as God's word makes things: Let there be light! So too do Jesus' words make the bread into his body. We hear from St. Paul tonight: "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." This cup is the new covenant in my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes."

We open this Triduum in promise that the Passover of Christ ushers in the New Covenant, the new law, the new way of believing, seeing and living in service for others. May your hunger and thirst be satisfied until we receive the Eucharist in real time. Make a spiritual communion every day. Because in this COVID reality, we are still in Communion, united with and to each other. I miss you and pray for you these holiest of days. May the Peace of Christ be with you.