

Maundy Thursday Homily 2021

A few weeks ago you may have seen a report about a church in Herefordshire which made a surprising discovery. A painting of the Last Supper had hung on the walls for two hundred years. It was fairly dirty after all this time and in need of attention – no longer the bright and engaging image it once was. So it was sent to be restored, and in the process they discovered that the work was actually an unknown masterpiece by the Renaissance artist Titian. All those years they had a treasure in their church, and they never knew it.

This story seems appropriate to share today, partly because we gather to celebrate the scene it depicts. This evening, as we begin the sacred Triduum, we find ourselves in the upper room with our Lord, gathered for this last meal before His arrest and death. But there's another reason why the story of the unknown masterpiece is relevant tonight. It invites us to ask ourselves: to what extent do we recognise the treasure that is held up before us, week in, week out, at Mass? Has the Eucharist become for us a familiar old image? Has it lost the freshness it had on the day of our first Communion, the brightness of this gift gradually hidden by the spiritual dust we accumulate over the years? Is it time for us to restore our sense of this treasure, this extraordinary gift? – the gift of Christ Himself.

Perhaps we are no longer surprised by the truth that Jesus comes to us in the Eucharist. Perhaps we no longer wonder at the fact that the Lord of heaven and earth tonight kneels down to wash the feet of His disciples. Perhaps tomorrow it will not shock us to see the Son of God hanging on a cross. Perhaps even the resurrection and the promise of eternal life have become so familiar that we are no longer amazed. And yet all of these things are surprising, indeed astonishing. They are astonishing because they reveal the lengths God will go to for us; they show the depths of His love.

This is precisely what St John tells us today: “He had always loved those who were His own in the world, and now He showed how perfect His love was.” Since the Jewish day ran from sunset to sunset, this meal begins the day of the Lord's death. Before the sun sets again, Jesus will be buried in the tomb. Shortly before that, a soldier will come and pierce the Lord's side with a spear, and Blood and water will flow from His dead body. Blood and water – two elements which are very much present at this Supper.

As Jesus and His disciples celebrated their Passover meal, they would have had in mind the events we heard about in the first reading. Many centuries earlier, in Egypt, the Passover lambs were slain and their blood daubed on the doorposts of the Hebrews. As we have heard, the angel of death passed over every house marked with lamb's blood, sparing them from the plague of death which swept the land. The blood saved them. How much more, then, does the Blood of Jesus, the true Lamb of God, save us, when His life is given on the cross. Tonight Jesus speaks of this sacrifice as He gives us the Eucharist: “This is the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be shed for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins.” His Blood is shed so that we can be saved.

We see another sign of this forgiveness in the water which Jesus uses tonight. He stoops to wash the feet of His disciples, to make them clean again after they have walked the dusty road of life. Jesus cleanses them, He forgives them. It's a sign of the Lord's ongoing desire to grant us forgiveness, to wash us clean again, whenever we need it.

Blood saves; water cleanses. And in these two we see also the greatness of His perfect love. Jesus today sets us an example of service, taking the lowest place despite being our Lord and Master. Even though He is God, He assumes the condition of a slave. He teaches us to do the same: "Love one another, just as I have loved you." His perfect love is shown in the Blood and water. In the water we see the great sign of a life poured out in service; in His Blood, given for us on the cross and given to us in the Eucharist, we see His sacrifice. Service and sacrifice – the two ways of living a life of love, perfectly shown forth in Jesus. As He tells us, He came "not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." To serve and to give Himself in sacrifice – this is His path of love. This is His life-long Way of the Cross.

Later on this night there will be Blood and water again. The Lord, in the agony of Gethsemane, sweats drops of Blood for us, such is His suffering. The water of His tears will be poured out for us. And from there He will be arrested, put on trial, condemned, executed and pierced – and Blood and water will flow from His side.

The heart of Jesus is pierced with love for us – unlimited love, love which is displayed in all its perfection on this day. "Love one another, as I have loved you", He teaches, on the very day He shows how perfect His love is. May the radiance of our Lord's love be shown to us anew in these days of His death and resurrection: may we allow ourselves to be surprised again at the tender love and mercy of our God, so perfectly shown forth on this day.

Fr Andrew

