

## HOLY THURSDAY 2017

In the weekday Gospel readings for the final days of Lent we often meet Jesus eluding the grasp of death. In the days leading up to the Jewish Passover when huge numbers of pilgrims are coming to Jerusalem and to the temple we find Jesus at the temple emphasizing in his teaching his equality with God, his Divine Sonship, his Divine nature. On numerous occasions the Jews, incensed at his apparent blasphemy, make moves to arrest him and even kill him by picking up stones to stone him on the spot. But on every occasion Jesus walks away, eludes them, or hides himself.

The Gospels tell us Jesus did this because “his hour had not yet come”; the time was not yet right; Jesus the Son of God would not and could not have his life taken from him – he would lay it down of his own accord as the ultimate expression of God’s love for us and as the means to our salvation. And he would do this in accordance with the will of the Father, that is, when the time was right.

Tonight, the night we now call Holy Thursday, is different; very different. Tonight the time is right! As we heard in our Gospel “It was before the festival of the Passover, and Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father.” Ever since the beginning of time, the time chosen by God for his supreme act of love for we his creatures, his children, would begin tonight. The time in which Jesus the Lamb of God would lay down his life for us would coincide with the great Jewish festival of Passover in which a multitude of lambs were sacrificed for the sake of the people.

So, tonight Jesus no longer makes any attempt to elude death. When he retires to the Garden of Gethsemane after celebrating the Last Supper with his Apostles Jesus offers no resistance to the thugs sent to arrest him. In fact, from his arrest tonight through to his trial before Pilate, his being dragged before Herod, being abused by the crowds, whipped, beaten, mocked and crucified, Jesus offers no resistance. He freely lays down his life for us.

Yes, tonight is different; tonight is like no other night. Tonight, Jesus the Son of God washes the feet of sinful human beings whom he also calls his friends, one of whom will betray him, another deny him, and all the rest except one desert him. Tonight, Jesus celebrates his Last Supper and gives us the twofold gift of the Eucharist and the Priesthood. Tonight Jesus sweats blood for us in the garden as he wrestles with the will of God the Father and with the weight of human sin. Tonight Jesus is subjected to a sham of a trial and is locked in a prison cell to await his execution. And tonight Jesus does and undergoes all of this for love of you and me.

As we heard in tonight’s Gospel Jesus “had always loved those who were his in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was”. Some translations use the beautiful expression “he showed the depth of his love”. Indeed, if you take anything home with you after tonight’s liturgy may it be the realization of the depth of God’s love for you and may you reflect on that love over the three days of the Paschal Triduum which begins tonight.

God has given us a mind with intelligence so that we might understand and grasp things. So we rightfully place a lot of emphasis on learning about the life of Christ and about his teachings handed on to us in the Church so that we might better understand and grasp God’s love for us, the life he calls us to live, and the eternal destiny to which he calls us. I for one place a lot of importance on us

making a real effort to learn about our faith which is one reason I chose for my motto the words Jesus spoke to his Apostles "Go forth and teach".

But as well as a mind God has also given us a *heart* so that we might know him in a more intimate and personal way, so that we might *feel him* if you like and sense his presence. Yes, God wants us to know him, but even more he wants us to experience his love for us and for us to love him in return. There's a lovely expression in Psalm 95: "If today you hear his voice harden not your hearts." In our fallen human nature we have an uncanny ability to harden or close our hearts to God and to others. The Prophet Ezekiel speaks of God removing our heart of stone and replacing it with a heart of flesh.

The Church's liturgy speaks to and feeds both our head and our heart, but I think it speaks particularly to the heart. The beauty of the Mass, its prayers, its sounds, its gestures and actions, even its smells and sacred silences, all come together to coax open our hearts to the love of God. Tonight's liturgy is different to other days; it is special. Aware that tonight is the night that Jesus showed us the depths of God's love for us, the Church seeks to make tonight's liturgy one which prizes our hearts open to the love of God even more than usual.

As we will pray a little later in the Eucharistic Prayer, tonight we celebrate "the most sacred day on which our Lord Jesus Christ was handed over for our sake". As we re-enact Jesus' actions and make present his loving sacrifice of this most sacred night may we open our hearts to see and hear and know how perfect is God's love for us.