

PASCHAL TRIDUUM

Homily, 29th March, 2018

Jesus washes his disciples' feet

Holy Thursday

father G. Paparone o.p.

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. (John, 13, 1-15)

We are celebrating the most important moment of the liturgic life and – consequently – of our lived faith; the readings of these three days introduce us to the deep mystery of our faith, the mystery that we need to absorb into our life with attention but also with patience, because what we are about to listen to is neither simple or easy.

We have to avoid celebrating a mere liturgic action for its own sake. I believe this is what Protestant Christians do; for them there is only a memory of the past.

On the contrary, we live the present, we want to live the present; the liturgy is a possibility we are given to help us live the present as disciples of the Lord.

Therefore, in these three days we are asked to meditate more deeply on Christianity: this is a **gift!**

God loved our world so much as to give us His Son, for the sake of all of us, not only for the just ones, the good ones, but also for the sinners, because all of us, both the good ones and the sinners, need God.

We all need Jesus, because we are asked to experience something that goes beyond our human possibilities, beyond what we call "a natural religiosity".

God gives us an extraordinary gift, the gift of His life. He wants to raise us to another level, the level of children of God: He is the only one who can do it!

The Gospel of John, which we have just listened to, creates the first spiritual environment in which we have to live the Eucharist, and also our entire life: *Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father* [therefore He deliberately chose to die for us]. *Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*

This liturgic gesture of the maundy, that we celebrate, is therefore a sign, a symbol, that we have to understand well; not only because we need to comprehend it, but also because we need to

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assimilate it, we need to live it, because this part of the Gospel ends in the following way: *Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.*

The heart of tonight's liturgy is this love of God for us, in this case the love of Jesus; a love so great that it leads to this extreme gesture of washing the feet of the disciples; a symbolic gesture, one that immediately makes us think about the humble services that the servants had to carry out to their masters.

Among the evangelists, Saint John is the one who, more than the others, used all the cultural, philosophical and spiritual categories of his time; for this reason he is also symbolized by the eagle; this means that he is the one who can see everything from above. For this reason, his Gospel is hard to understand completely, it is difficult in its deeper meanings.

Today we will try and have a wider understanding of this simple and humble gesture of a servant who washes his master's feet.

I am saying this because in Saint John's texts everything has to be understood in a symbolic way. This means that we both need to have eyes capable to go deeper, and that this text is not only about this gesture: from Saint Peter's reaction and Jesus' answer we get to reflect about the meaning of this sentence: *Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.*

Why having no part with Jesus if you don't let Him wash your feet?

After Peter's reaction: *not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!*, this is what Jesus says: *Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean.*

What is the symbolic meaning of the feet?

For sure it is about letting Jesus serve us in this gesture of the washing.

At this point, however we have to remember a passage from Isaiah: *How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation* (Is 52,7)

This is a passage that we, the Dominicans, particularly love, because we are preachers, we identify ourselves with those who evangelize, and also when celebrating Saint Dominic's Feast the liturgy suggests this reading.

Therefore, feet are something that refers to life, to the person, to the messenger; they support our whole body, our whole being, and enable us to move; symbolically, they represent our own person, our way of being, our positions.

The foot enables us to stand straight, it is the symbol of our attitudes, of our role, it also represents our criteria, our ideals.

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We can therefore say that, symbolically, feet represent our relations with the world, because it is through them that we move in the world.

Purifying the feet means purifying our relation with the world and with God.

This is why Jesus says to Peter: *unless I wash you, you have no part with me.*

We could also more simply interpret this sentence in the following way: if Jesus does not become the support of our life, we cannot live with Him, because our whole life needs to rest on Him.

Our earthly life rests on our feet; in the same way our spiritual, psychological, relational life has to rest on Jesus; especially on Him as a person, with this attitude of service, love and gift.

What is the point of support of our life today?

Maybe feeling loved by the others?

Maybe having a prestigious job, a relevant position, an award?

Where is the support of our spiritual and psychological life?

Let's try and think about what is the support to our daily existence.

Is it really Jesus?

Or is it something else?

Having our feet washed also means recognizing that this change, this chance to modify our support in life, can only be received as a gift, it is not an effort on our part, it is not our possibility.

It is exactly what Jesus does and Peter didn't want Him to do in the first place: **letting Him wash our feet; it means letting Jesus transform our life, modify it, change our way of seeing things, our way of thinking.**

Many times, in the confessional, I met people who had received big and heavy sentimental losses – spouse betrayals, sibling betrayals,... – burdensome situations that risk to weaken us for good, because we cannot find the strength necessary to react.

In this cases, in order to be able to help, I thought it might be useful to offer – and I am offering the same to you now – this simple advice: **try and look at your wife, your husband, your child, anyone who might have been the cause of your wound... with the eyes of Jesus.**

How is Jesus looking at them?

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How is Jesus looking at us, how is Jesus seeing us?

No matter how ugly and evil we might be, Jesus will always look at us with eyes of affection, of love and of mercy, because Jesus would like to change our heart and bring us all to Heaven.

Being Christians does not simply mean adhering to the “Credo”, this is quite easy.

Being Christians means adhering to a vision of the world, to an interpretation of reality, to a way of putting ourselves in a relation with the others; in the way Jesus explains today: *now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet...*

Faith is about imitating Jesus, take on His gaze, His feelings!

But how can we, poor creatures, do that?

The only way to succeed is to let Him help us.

Every Sunday we go and celebrate the Eucharist and we receive the body of the Lord; why?

What is the effect that the Eucharist should have on our life?

The one of assimilating to Him!

Saint Augustine explained this concept in an extraordinary way: when we eat the material bread, we assimilate it and can physically live because we receive and transform the material elements contained in the bread; in the same way, **when we receive the Eucharist, we can be assimilated to Jesus, we can be transformed into Him, we should be “blended in” with Him.**

Here is what the Eucharist does!

By giving Himself to us as a gift, Jesus wants us to blend in with Him; for this reason the Church is called “the mystic Body” of Jesus; in order to achieve this, we need to use our freedom, which cannot be used without the awareness and the will, that is to say the determination: the call must come from us: “Blend me in with You, make me assimilate to You, make me become like You! Let me live in the world as You!”

This is what we have to expect from the Eucharist.

There are people who go to church just to pray for their dead ones...
But we should start praying for ourselves!

Or, we go to church to ask for grace: for a child or a grandchild to find a job...

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These are needs too, but we cannot sacrifice the Eucharist to our needs!
Anche questi sono bisogni, ma non possiamo asservire l'Eucarestia ai nostri bisogni!

The Eucharist is there to transform us into Christ, this is the greatest need, this is the goal of the Eucharist.

In a while I will perform a symbolic gesture that reminds us of the humble service carried out by Jesus, because also priests – especially priests – have to become servants; everything I have said is especially true for us.

And, thanks to the universal priesthood of the believers, you are “priests” too, and have to give yourselves and serve the world in the same way Jesus did.