

Holy Thursday

As the sun sets on this Thursday evening we find ourselves entering upon the holiest space to which our faith can take us. We are travelling in time, because the clock is still ticking, and it is the round of the liturgical year that has brought us here. We move spatially too: for us to enter at this portal, we must assemble as the People of God, forsaking all other duties and occupations to be here. These things we have already accomplished. Now it is time for God to do the rest, as we turn our minds and hearts to his Son who is in our midst, and let his deeds take the place of ours. Do you hear how he calls his disciples to let this happen?

Now you do not understand what I am doing for you: later you will understand

You cannot follow me now: you will follow me later.

These two sentences should be read beside the commandment we do not read in John's Gospel, about the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup:

Do this in memory of me.

These words, which at first may appear to *separate* us from Jesus, are actually much more vital. They tell us that here Jesus is doing a work beyond our human comprehension, a work that can only be understood in the space between Father and Son, the space where that obedience lives which is beyond our power to offer.

There is in the whole of Holy Week a divine irony at work. Paradox meets us at every moment: tonight, for example

*You call me Lord and Master, and truly, for so I am.
Yet here I am doing work for you lower than a slave's work.*

This spiritual paradox springs from the heart of Christ, who is Son of God and yet dies on the Cross: a man as human as any of us, yet the only begotten Son in whom the Father rejoices.

In the story we read tonight there are two voices speaking; a skilful editor has united them in one account. I want you to hear both of them. One sees the meaning of the washing of feet in a very simple way, one that is easy for any of us to grasp: Jesus is giving us an example of humility. We shall have fulfilled what he asks of us when we have been as humble and selfless as he is, towards each another:

*As I have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet.
I have given you an example to follow.*

The other voice speaks of a much deeper mystery, and Peter is told:

you cannot understand now; later you will understand.

I can't believe that Peter is simply incapable of understanding an example of humility. There is something greater here, something which only the Cross will illuminate. When Jesus says *later*, he means *after the Crucifixion*. In washing their feet, in this willing self-humiliation, Jesus is giving them the key to the understanding of the Cross. He is going to the Cross to show them how much he loves them, to show them how obediently he serves them; but above all, he goes to the Cross to show them the extent of the Incarnation, how far his becoming man for us makes him go. When they try to comprehend his death and its meaning, they are to remember this last free act of his life, and read in it the love, the obedience, and the humility which are consummated only in the Cross. Just as much as in the broken bread and the shared cup, this washing of feet is *his body given for them*. When we give ourselves in similar service and selflessness, we re-enter the holy ground of this Thursday, when Judas went out into the dark to betray him, and the Father handed him over in the radiance of perfect love, and Jesus was taken into our power.

In this time and this space, we receive him tonight in the bread that is his given body, the cup which is his shed blood: the remission of our sins, and a new covenant for eternity.

Unless I wash you, you can have no part of me.