

“God Hidden in the Form of a Servant”

Holy Thursday Homily 2008

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Jesus' hour has come. It is the hour of his Passion, and it begins now, with the Last Supper. The hour will climax in the Passover sacrifice on the Cross.

Jesus washes his disciples' feet during “the supper.” All the early Christians knew which meal this was. They would have celebrated it each Sunday in the Mass. It has been part of the Christians' tradition from the beginning, as we heard in the second reading from 1 Corinthians. John has already given Christ's great Eucharistic sermon in chapter 6. Jesus has already taught that one must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to gain eternal life. The evangelist can assume that his hearers know that Christ has just instituted the Eucharist earlier in the same meal. They have often heard the story recounted. Now the evangelist can give a commentary on the Eucharist in the form of Christ's action. Now Jesus can begin his greatest sermon. It begins with the washing of the feet, and concludes with his last words on the Cross.

Jesus has just told his apostles to take his flesh and eat it, flesh hidden under the form of bread. He has given them his blood to drink hidden under the form of wine. He says to them, “I stooped so low, that you can eat my flesh and drink my blood. But you do not yet understand. You cannot see what I am doing. So I stoop low again to wash your feet like a slave.” Washing the feet was the work that the lowest slaves did for the masters. It was considered beneath the dignity of most servants and slaves. Why does Jesus do it? Because he will die like a criminal or a slave. Jesus foreshadows his death. But he does so under a veiled sign, through the action of foot washing.

Earlier in the meal, Jesus' flesh and blood were concealed beneath the appearances of bread and wine. Now his divinity is concealed within the body of the servant who washes his disciples' feet. This is the last thing they expected. Jesus is unveiling a God who does the unexpected. The Son of God has veiled himself within a human

body. He has hidden his divine glory so that his disciples can approach him with confidence. He conceals the glory of God so that we can approach him without fear and trembling. He has taken on the form of a servant, a truly human existence, so that we can touch God himself. The veiling of divine glory is the one path to unveil divine love. Jesus conceals so that he can reveal.

Jesus takes the Jewish meal ritual, something so familiar to his apostles. But then, he adds something radically new. To the normal prayers of the Jewish meal ritual, he adds the words, "Take and eat, this is my body ... take and drink, this is my blood." The ordinary becomes extraordinary. A simple meal becomes a banquet with the hidden God.

The washing of hands and feet preceded every Jewish meal. Now, Jesus adds another washing. He shows them that they must be cleansed inwardly to share fruitfully in the Eucharist. The washing of the feet signifies Christ pouring out his blood for his disciples. His death will purify them. Jesus offers his apostles a kind of baptism.

Jesus stoops down to our level so as to elevate us into a divine communion. He descends so that we can ascend. He becomes our slave to destroy our slavery to sin, the barrier that keeps us from God. He becomes our food, so that we can live from him. He invites us to a banquet, and offers the choicest meat. But we are not ready to behold him directly. So he veils himself under the appearances of bread and wine.

Friends long to be in each other's presence. They enjoy the physical presence of the other, not just memories and kind thoughts. We want to hold on to the ones we love, to see them and touch them. But Jesus will die, resurrect and ascend to heaven. His body dwells in heaven. But we long to be with him already in this life. So he gives in to this holy longing. He comes to dwell within us, in his very flesh and blood. Now we can touch the beloved. But we cannot see him, not yet. Only faith recognizes the veiled presence of the divine Lover in our midst. Faith gives us partial vision.

“As I have done, so you also must do.” Jesus stoops down from the height of his divinity and serves his own creature. He asks us to stoop down as well. He elevates us into divine communion, so that we too can descend and reach out to others. God comes to serve us, so we must serve the least of society. We must give ourselves. We need to give something of our time, our energy, our love, to those who count for nothing, those whose God-given dignity is still veiled, whose dignity is still hidden to the eyes of the world. We are to go and serve those in chronic poverty. We are to reach out to battered women, to the handicapped, to the dying, to the unborn, those who are nobodies in the eyes of the world. So often, our society treats them as servants or slaves, as nothing. So we must become like them, and live for others. Our share of the Eucharist will be quite fruitless unless we can live the Eucharist each day. But Jesus doesn't just ask for a couple of good works here and there. He orders his whole life towards the service of his disciples. So must we.

The apostles could only glimpse the glorious beauty of God by seeking his hidden presence within the body of Jesus, who performs the work of a slave. Jesus takes on the appearance of the lowest human being. He washes feet and he dies on a Cross. The same holds true for us. If we want to glimpse the beauty of God's face, then we must look for him on the faces of the least among human beings. We must look for him on the faces of the poor. We are to look for him on the faces of the single pregnant mother that no one cares about. We must look for him on the faces of the unborn who may not live. We are to look for him on the faces of the nobodies of this world.

In a few minutes, we are going to worship God hidden under the appearances of bread and wine. We believe that he will be truly physically present among us, our divine friend dwelling in our midst. By faith, we can see the hidden presence of Christ's flesh and blood. But will we see Christ hidden in those who count **for nothing**?