

“Your lamb shall be without blemish.” Ex. 12: 5 Words taken from the Book of Exodus.

Hanging in the Prado in Madrid is a picture – about 4 feet square – by the Spanish artist, Francisco de Zurbarán (1598 – 1664) of a perfect white Merino lamb lying on an altar of marble with its legs tied together, docilely waiting to be sacrificed.

It’s called *Agnus Dei/Lamb of God*, and I saw it a few years ago when it was on loan to the National Gallery in London.

It was in a large room on its own, and it dominated that space.

Spiritually speaking, it really knocked me off my feet, because it spoke to me of Jesus far more powerfully than any painting of the Crucifixion I’ve ever seen.

It shocked me, and forced me to really think about what Jesus did by dying on the Cross for my sake. It was seeing that lamb, having committed no crime, waiting to have its blood spilt to wash away sin that did it.

The lamb without blemish; waiting to give its life for the guilty.

Tonight, in this church, through Word and Sacrament, we’re with Jesus – the lamb without blemish – in the Upper Room in Jerusalem.

And the words: “Do this in remembrance of me.” Lk. 22: 19 Jesus spoke over the bread and wine at the Last Supper, resonate down the centuries to speak to us at this Maundy Thursday Mass of the Lord’s Supper.

‘Maundy,’ the name, by which this day is often called, is an Old English word coming from the Latin, ‘Mandatum,’ which, in modern English means, ‘Something commanded.’

The readings for this evening are all to do with, ‘Something commanded.’

And particularly the Gospel, which is set in the context of Jesus, and the Disciples celebrating the Passover together.

The Passover meal that every year for generations the Jews had celebrated as a memorial of the first Passover they’d eaten in haste on the night that their slavery in Egypt ended.

This night, the Lord says in the Book of Exodus: “Is the Passover of the Lord: a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord: throughout your generations you shall observe it.”

Ex. 12: 11 & 14

And there’s the word ‘Remembrance’ again.

‘Do this in remembrance of me.’

At the Last Supper Jesus instituted the great Sacrament of Sacrificial Love – the Eucharist – which makes really present the Crucified, Risen, and Glorified Lord Jesus under the humble appearance of bread and wine

Remembering that, in Him, we pass over from death to eternal life: “Christ is the firstborn Son who is slain. He is also the lamb without blemish or broken bones, the Lamb who is slaughtered, whose blood is sprinkled and whose body must be eaten. The purpose of our sharing the holy sacrifice of the Eucharist is to unite us as God’s family. Our communion is actualized by eating the Passover Lamb of the New Covenant, which we receive every [Eucharist.]

Scott Hahn: A Father Who Keeps His Promises p. 188

But don’t you think it strange that in the Gospel for this Mass of the Lord’s Supper there’s no mention of bread and wine?

There’s no, ‘Do this in remembrance of me,’ from the lips of Jesus.

But in Chapter 6 of his Gospel John’s already told us about Jesus, the Bread of Life.

Jesus, who tells us: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again.

Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” Jn. 6: 35

To come, and believe in Jesus whom we really receive; Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity in the Eucharist for our salvation.

For, Jesus says: "Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise that person at the last day." Jn. 6: 53 – 54

However, in John's account of the Last Supper Jesus does leave us with, 'Something commanded:' "This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you." Jn. 15: 12

Mandatum – Maundy – Something Commanded.

Many interpret 'Something commanded' by Jesus as a word of law, which restricts our freedom.

Quite the contrary: to gaze into the face of Jesus is to: "Look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom." Jm. 1: 25

And Jesus Himself must do 'Something commanded:' to do whatever His Father asks of Him.

However, He sees it as something to be savoured: "My nourishment [says Jesus] comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work." Jn. 4: 34

In Jesus, the Holy Spirit dwelt in all its fullness; so to do what His Father wanted wasn't a burdensome, empty law.

And, that same Spirit – God's greatest gift to us – blossoms in us when we come to know Jesus as our friend.

"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command [Jesus says.]" Jn. 15: 13 - 14

Jesus laid down His life for each of us so that we can be His friends.

Reflecting on that should take us beyond a mechanical view of coming to the Eucharist as, 'Something commanded,' which is imposed on us as a burden.

If a non-Christian walked in here in a few minutes, and saw us washing feet they wouldn't understand what we're doing.

Even Peter at the Last Supper didn't understand, because he said to Jesus: "'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus replied, 'You don't understand now what I am doing, but someday you will.'"

Jn. 13: 6 – 7

In Jesus' time it was usual to wash the feet of visitors as a real sign of welcome, but the slave always did it.

So Jesus, in washing Peter's feet, is assuming the position of a slave.

And Paul reminds us of that very powerfully in Philippians where he says that Jesus: "Made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a slave, being made in human likeness. And he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!" Phil. 2: 7 – 8

We, too, have to pattern our lives after Jesus who: "Came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." Mt. 20: 28

And yet, Jesus didn't just wash Peter's feet; He went on, and washed the feet of all the Disciples – including Judas who was to betray Him to death.

"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." Jn. 13: 14 – 15

Many feet walk into our lives every day: feet of the nice, feet of the nasty, feet of those we love, feet of those who don't like us, feet of those we don't like.

Jesus, in washing of those dirty, smelly feet is a real challenge to all of us; because by being Christians we've promised to live out the characteristics of Jesus.

To let Him change our sinful, frail human nature into His image and likeness.

Peter, in his frail, sinful way denied knowing Jesus at the very moment when His Lord and Master needed him most.

Yet Peter, in the depths of despair, somehow knew that Jesus still loved him.

On the shores of the Sea of Galilee after the Resurrection Jesus asks Peter: "Do you truly love me?" [and Peter answers] "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jn. 21: 16

Jesus had never stopped being Peter's friend and now Peter knew that for himself.

Then Jesus says, 'Something commanded' to Peter: "Follow me." Jn. 21: 19

That open-ended commandment has the lightness of grace in it because Peter: "Looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom." Jm. 1: 25 and follows His friend Jesus, who washed his feet, and laid down His life for Peter so that he could enjoy Eternal Life with Jesus.

Jesus, who laid down His life for us, and gives Himself to us in the Eucharist, so that we too can be His friends, and have Eternal Life.

"Worthy is [Jesus] the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!" Rev. 5: 12