

## Maundy Thursday: The Mass of the Lord's Supper.

Feet. Most of us do not, I suspect, give much consideration to our feet. Unless they hurt. When they give us pain, then we take notice. And there are many afflictions which could cause us severe discomfort in our feet: swollen ankles, blisters, verrucas, in-growing toe-nails, bunions, as well as bruises and breakages and cruciate ligament damage, so fashionable these days among sports people. Talking of whom we should not forget athlete's foot; nor trench foot, an additional misery to those fighting in the muddied wastes in the first World War. The possible complaints are manifold but, on the whole, our feet, like so much else, are taken completely for granted until something goes wrong. Then we realise how much we depend on them. Without feet, we won't get very far.

For most of history, most people have, for most of the time, travelled on foot. Many still do. That many of our young people never walk anywhere, is shameful. Their consequences in sluggishness of body and mind will affect them significantly if they remain sedentary.

Even car drivers need their feet. Cars can be adapted but most are reliant on at least one reliable foot. (I was once, and only once, driven by someone whose vehicle was automatic, but he used both feet; one for the accelerator and the other for the brake. I have seldom been more terrified in a car, as his control of the machine was precarious.)

In some cultures in times past girls' feet have been broken to suit the demands of male fashion and rules of acceptability. We must shudder at such horror.

The Church puts feet at the centre of tonight's liturgy; we have recalled in word and in action, Jesus' ritual performance before his farewell-meal with his friends in John's Gospel, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. It is an action which appears almost to replace the giving of himself in the forms of bread and wine which we hear in the other three Gospels and in Paul's recalling of the Eucharistic story. The fourth evangelist has already given us a sort of Eucharistic narrative in Chapter VI. Now he is giving us the meaning of the Eucharist. If we are to share Christ as food we must also imitate him in service. If we are unwilling to serve our brothers and sisters in doing the most menial of tasks for them, and allowing them, as Peter discovers, to minister humbly to us, then we mock Christ if we take him into ourselves as Communion. We must be in communion with him in act / service to be in communion with him in bread and wine.

The washing of feet itself is a symbolic act which represents the whole drama which is to follow. Accepting the role of servant is of a piece with his accepting the death of

a slave. So to be in communion with the Lord in the Eucharist we must live in his way of service and be constant in our service to the end of our lives.

To serve in the name of Christ is not to be obsequious or servile. Christ is God-among-s. Service in Christ is therefore the highest, the most noble human calling.

Serving one another is the way many of you live your lives, though you would not, I suspect, put it in such terms. A great deal of your time is taken up in acts of service: bringing your partner a cup of tea, being a parent, baby-sitting the grand-children, doing the shopping for an aged neighbour, To serve is usually to be on one's feet. But we also serve by praying, - for family and friends, and the people in need fleetingly seen on the news.

We seldom think of our feet, unless they begin to hurt. Then we know about them, and we know how much we require them to carry us for our usual functions to function. We carry out acts of service throughout each day, seldom giving them any heed because they are just there to do.

Jesus' act of service helps remind us of our feet, and the many parts of our selves that we little heed until they give trouble. And also how we serve without noticing; how much more we could do if we put our minds to it; and why the sharing of his body, the bread broken, and his blood, the wine poured out, is so vital for us. It is him we serve, it is his strength which empowers us to serve, and it is Christ who continually ministers to us.

## Good Friday: The Commemoration of the Lord's Passion.

Hands and voices. Last night feet were planted firmly centre-stage. Jesus washed his disciples feet as an instruction in the requirement for serving the community as he the Master took the part of a slave, with ewer and basin, and soap and towel. He had come among us 'not to be served but to serve' (Mk 10,45); now he was to die the death of a slave.

The Romans found crucifixion abhorrent, Cicero the great orator cannot bring himself to name the horrible thing. But their generals found it suited their purposes of deterrence and, by the way, it offered a cheap amusement to the masses too. But it was not the punishment for any of Rome's citizens or allies. It was reserved for insurrectionists, those who fought against Rome, and slaves, whose lives were without value anyway.

Jesus' hands were the hands of a manual worker. He was a '*teckton*'; a word usually translated as 'carpenter' but it meant an artisan who could put his hand to anything, building, repair and wood work as well. So his hands would have been blistered, calloused and scarred; dirty with the ingrained dirt that can never be washed out, with grime trapped forever beneath the finger nails. When we see Jesus' hand upraised as in blessing, the crooked smaller fingers may have been the consequence of his manual work. Not for the Lord, the smooth, manicured hands of the elite, the Sanhedrin who owned the wealth and controlled the Temple and its resources, and who handed him over to the Roman Prefect who alone could pronounce the death sentence, thus keeping their hands as clean as they kept themselves undefiled by staying outside Pilate's Palace. Jesus' hands were the hands of a man of toil. Easily despised and rejected by those whose work was cerebral not muscular.

Jesus' hands had touched the sick and healed them; embraced lepers and welcomed them back into society; taken the hand of a twelve year old girl and raised her to life; His hands had blessed the children; broken bread and shared it, feeding thousands. Now those hands are bound, perhaps shackled, so he cannot protect himself from the blows, or wipe from his face the spittle. And soon they will be nailed to a wooden beam. To be pedantic, the nails will pierce the wrists which can bear the weight of the body. In consequence the thumb and fingers will be drawn in as a nerve is taut across the nail, bringing sharp, constant pain to a racked and pain-loaded body.

Throughout his ministry we hear Jesus' voice. He preaches and teaches; he tells stories and enthral the crowds. He castigates the rulers of the people for their hypocrisy and challenges demons to flee at the sound of his word of command. By his word storms are calmed and waves subside. His voice is powerful and effective. Has there ever been such a voice?

Throughout the passion Jesus is supremely passive. The Latin word *pateor*, means to suffer and gives us 'passion'. It also gives us the word 'passive'. It is the opposite of

active. To be passive is not to do, but to have things done to you. From the time of his arrest Jesus is passive. His feet take him where others command him to go; his hands are bound; and he speaks hardly at all. His voice is heard more times in John's Passion than in the others all together. For in John Jesus remains in control, even though he is a prisoner, free though he is bound; and able to decide when he will die, whatever his tormentors do to him.

He childes Pilate, the indecisive representative of the might of Roman power and justice, for whom truth equates with political expediency. And on the cross, he entrusts mother to disciple and disciple to mother, bequeathing one community of faith that unites relatives and followers; he fulfils the Scriptures, by crying out, 'I thirst', reminding us how he promised living waters to the Samaritan woman (Jn 4, 10); and how he had invited all who were thirsty to come to him (Jn 7,37). Finally, he cries, 'It is accomplished!' The voice falls silent; the hands relax. Jesus has been lifted up from the earth (the passive voice) and, as he said, people now begin to be drawn to him. Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus who came by night, they courageously come forward to give the Lord a royal burial, with an abundance of spices and ointments and a new tomb.

He has died the death of a slave, passive, bound and dumb, but for those who are able to see he is king; he is the Way, the Truth and the Life; and, raised up he is given the name which is above every name: God's name. Risen, glorified, his hands and feet will for eternity bear the marks of suffering, symbols of glory; and his voice will never again be silenced.

Holy Saturday: Easter Vigil.

## **Homily after the First Reading (No. 2) Gen. 22 - The Aqueda (the binding of Isaac)**

How old was Isaac, when this dreadful episode took place? Was he too young to put up any resistance when his aged father (now over hundred) bound him hand and foot, ready for the knife's sharp edge? Was he an adolescent, as Caravaggio, and others, have depicted him, and so able to fight off the old man had he wanted to? But he didn't. He complied with his father, as a good son should. For the command of the father is second only to the command of God. We do not know the answer to any of these questions, but it should not stop us asking them. The Bible, so sparing in the information it gives, invites us to speculate, to fill in the back story; to use our imagination, and consider all the possibilities and thus wring out every drop of meaning from the sacred, though deeply troubling, tale.

We are told at the outset that this is a test for Abraham, so we need not be concerned for the life of Isaac. But it is easy to imagine Isaac's life scarred by this event; the horror of the knife placed at his throat by his father giving nightly nightmares. Isaac, as a man, is supremely passive. He never travels outside the boundaries of the Land. Even when a bride is needed. The only place to seek a bride is in the ancestral homelands, up in the north, where the Euphrates begins its long journey; at Haran the place from which Abram set out in faith at the word of God. But Isaac does not go there to seek a wife. Abraham sends a servant, laden with treasures. He comes back without the wealth but with the girl, the beautiful Rebecca. They fall for each other; Rebecca literally falling from her horse when she sees her husband. Isaac takes her into his mother's tent. Sarah is now dead. Isaac is comforted by Rebecca at her loss we are told; reminding us that there were two victims of God's testing of Abraham.

Suddenly Isaac is an old man, blind and close to death. He favours the elder twin, Esau, a man's man, a hunter, the man Isaac, wounded by trauma, was never allowed to be. The old man's final indignity is to be fooled by his wife and his unloved (by him, doted on by her) younger son. He knows the meal was prepared too quickly; he could tell the voice was that of Jacob, but the smell, the hairy arms, these unquestionably belonged to Esau. And so the blessing was given to the wrong boy. And once spoken could never be un-spoken. Did Isaac, soon to be gathered to his ancestors,, wonder about the strange, the mysterious ways of God and the curious way God fulfils his purpose?

I imagine Isaac, jumping round like a young puppy in excitement at the prospect of a journey with his father. A trip to offer sacrifice to the God who had looked after his father, who was ever true to his promises. Then, tired after a three day walk, he wonders about the sacrifice to come. The wood is there, carried on Isaac's back; the means for lighting a fire are to hand, and so is the knife. But what about the animal for the sacrifice? Should not they have a lamb with them? He asks the question. And gets the answer, "The Lord will provide". Did the first rustlings of doubt then disturb

the young mind. They walk on in silence. They never speak again.

It must have been a long, difficult, silent journey back. Abraham has passed the test. But lost Sarah his wife, for as we saw a few weeks ago husband and wife never speak again either,[see 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent (B) 2015] and they appear never to meet again; and he has lost Isaac, the son for whom he waited for a life time and some more. They are never on the same stage together again.

Has putting God first ever been so costly?

### **Homily after the Gospel:**

The Aqueda is a bleak story that raises questions about God's motives. Mark's Passion raises similar questions. Mount Moriah where the sacrifice of Isaac is to take place was identified in Rabbinic tradition as Mount Zion, the site of Jerusalem. Thus the location for both attempted and real sacrifice are the same.

Mark's account of Jesus' Passion is the bleakest, darkest of the four. From the time the group of friends leave the room of the supper the shadows lengthen, the skies grow black, and the story is one of unremitting gloom. At prayer in Gethsemane Jesus is dying of fear as he prays "*Abba*" (Father) but there is no answer. The disciples flee, leaving everything to get away from him and save themselves. He is handed over like a piece of unwanted refuse from arresting party to chief priests, to abusers, to Pilate to execution squad. At the end, battered and bloodied, he dies utterly alone, abandoned, it seems, even by God. No longer '*Abba*' but '*Eloi*' – 'My God'. "Why have you forsaken me"., he asks. Alone under a black sky he dies.

Yet throughout the story Jesus has been announcing the future, anticipating the story as it unfolds. He foretold Judas' betrayal; and Peter's denials; and his companions scattering. He also told them on their walk to Gethsemane that he would go before them to Galilee. They did not know what he meant. Neither did we.

At the empty tomb its meaning is clear. He is risen. Death could not contain him. At the cross, when Jesus had died, we were told the veil of the Temple was ripped in two, from top to bottom. This was a top-down act of God, ripping asunder the barrier between heaven, God's home, and the world of humanity – as was done at Jesus' Baptism when the the heavens were torn asunder and the Spirit flowed down in the form of a dove. And when Jesus is dead, a human voice, for the first time in the Gospel of Mark, a human person properly identifies Jesus. "Truly", said the centurion, "This was the Son of God". Jesus is recognised and acknowledged as God's son; his death has achieved the breaking of the barrier between God and mankind, as his baptism announced, Sins are forgiveable. And now he has gone ahead of the disciples to Galilee, There they will meet him as their Risen Lord.

The bleakness of the story of Abraham and the binding of Isaac has been repeated. A

son has carried the wood for the sacrifice. A son has been abandoned. But now the Son is gloriously revealed as risen, fully alive; and mankind is found, and restored to God.

Happy Easter everyone.