

Holy Thursday

13th April 2017

'Light and Love in the face of Death'

Ex 12: the Passover instructions Ps 115: *the cup of salvation I will raise*

1Cor 11: *this is what I received and in turn passed on to you ...*

Jn 13: 1–15: *if I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me.*

I looked back and saw that last year on Holy Thursday I reflected on the horrific Brussels-Airport bombing that had taken place two days before. Then I thought about recent days *this* year: the loss of life in terrorist actions on Westminster Bridge; St Petersburg, Stockholm, Dortmund; and most tragically, with 45 deaths, the bombs in the Coptic churches of Egypt during their Palm Sunday celebrations. The latter, of course, was a deliberate targeting of practising Christians at their Holy Week celebrations: in one, the bomb ripped through the pews at the front of the church. Could we imagine that sort of persecution, where we might have to risk death by being faithful to Our Lord in coming to Mass?

The very first Mass, of course, had overtones of death — at the Last Supper the Lord had arrived at the eve of His Passion, though only He, and not the apostles, knew that. What He was about to offer them in this new Passover, the Sacrament of the Eucharist, was the abiding memorial of

His Passion and Death, His supreme Sacrifice offered once and for all time. And yet, whilst this shadow of death, the suffering of Good Friday the next day, hangs over the Last Supper, yet the mood is not a dispiriting one. In fact, when you think about it, of the three days of the Sacred Triduum, the dark of Good Friday is flanked by two days of light: both Holy Thursday (the Last Supper) and Easter Sunday (the Resurrection) shine out with light and life. The shadow of death is both preceded by, and followed by, actions of Jesus that shed divine light on the situation: Jesus is in control; He lets Himself be taken to Calvary, but it is He, and not the soldiers, the Jewish authorities, or even Pilate, who is in charge — He is. He is the Light of the World; He is the unconquerable Son of God; He is the Bread of Life.

The Last Supper then, already sets the scene for the Crucifixion of the next day within the context of Jesus's huge outpouring of merciful love. He demonstrates this both by the *Mandatum* (the Washing of the Feet) and by the Eucharist (the gift of His Body & Blood) — both actions, the example of Service and the institution of the Sacrament,

show that Jesus wills nothing less than that His life fill our lives. The Last Supper is just as much a high-point as the Resurrection, since in it He already reveals the fact that He lives an indestructible life: “Do this in memory of Me,” He says, both about the Washing of the Feet, and the Eucharist. “As I have washed your feet,” He says, “so you should also wash each other’s” ... and then He says, “This is the new and eternal covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins.” These actions weren’t the parting gift of someone just about to be destroyed bravely in an ugly execution; these were actions instituted for eternal memorial by the living God: He who would overcome the death and destruction, and restore humanity to a truly human life.

In the Washing of the Feet (our practical acts of mercy) and in the Eucharist (our prayer, sacraments and devotion) we really come to life, and we find the antidote to the evil in the world around us. Our Lord Jesus has given us these things directly from His own hand, and He gives them to us that we may also overcome the horrors of sin, evil and death, as He did. These lessons of the Last Supper,

then, are truly life-changing. We can escape the spiral of dispiriting news and human tragedies by living out these lessons from Jesus. We must apply ourselves to the practical expression of mercy; and we must equally apply ourselves to prayer and the Holy Mass. When we love our neighbour, and when we love God, through this way of holy living, then the destructive elements of the world fall away: we are not overwhelmed by them, as we have a human and divine purpose that is not diminished by tragedies befalling the world and befalling us. Just as Our Lord wasn’t eliminated by His mortal end on a Cross, but had a much greater and more loving plan of life; so He shows us that through mercy and prayer we can also put into action, in the face of death, His plan for life. We need not be down about the horrors that seem incessantly to occur, the expressions of hate that keep occurring. Our Lord is the perfect expression of love, and we must imitate Him in order to recreate the world as He would want it. Let Him overcome the tragedies of the world, every day, in you, by your prayer and practical charity: let us live the Last Supper every day!