

HOLY THURSDAY – (Homily 03)

“Remember and Live”

(Ex 12:1-8, 11-14; 1 Cor 11:23-26; Jn 13:1-15)

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The ability to remember is a powerful gift. Conversely, loss of memory through Alzheimer’s Disease is a terrible tragedy. One family lost their mother to that disease seven years before she died. At the same time, they delighted when she did remember them or some other incident whenever they visited her. Memory can bring pain or pleasure, depending on the event in mind.

God invites us to remember and to live. Today, Holy Thursday, we remember three separate incidents that give life.

In the first reading, Moses instructs the Hebrews in Egypt concerning the sacrifice of a lamb for all the people. He tells them that the blood of that lamb will save them from the angel of death. They are then commanded by God to remember this night, this miraculous event, and to celebrate it in perpetuity. That annual celebration remembering their liberation and celebrating their freedom would give them identity, purpose and meaning.

In the Gospel, Jesus, THE Lamb of God, who was about to give his life as a sacrifice for the whole world, does something very unusual – he humbly and shockingly washes the disciples’ feet as would a slave. Then he commands them to remember this act and to live it out on a daily basis as his disciples. Humble service would be the way of life in the new reign of God that he was inaugurating in the world through his death and resurrection.

St. Paul, in the second reading, never saw Jesus with his eyes. He was not at the Last Supper, but here he hands on to us what was handed on to him as a priceless memory – how Jesus took bread and wine and transformed them into his own Body and Blood. St. Paul thus presents to us what St. John leaves out in his Gospel, the Institution of the Eucharist, because of his focus on the meaning of the Eucharist, humble service. We are instructed to do this in memory of what Jesus did, and to find nourishment, strength and a closer relationship with Christ through this memorial meal.

Other scriptural passages bring to mind other memories that add to the meaning of this celebration. Centuries earlier, Samuel had anointed David

not far from Bethany, setting him on the road to his destiny as the King of Israel. And in the previous chapter to this one in the Gospel, Mary anoints the feet of Jesus in a lavish way, preparing him for his death and resurrection.

In the Gospel that we heard tonight, the washing of the feet is like an anointing. Jesus tenderly and lavishly washes the feet of the apostles so that their destiny will be like his. They must understand the meaning of following Jesus in terms of humble service.

Our present Pope Benedict XVI, in one of his homilies on Holy Thursday, has this to say about this feast. “There is still a more profound dimension to that love. The Lord removes our filth with the purifying force of his goodness - to wash one another's feet means, above all, to forgive one another tirelessly; to always begin again, though it might seem useless. It means to purify one another by enduring each other mutually and accepting that others endure us.”

A washing of the feet ceremony is part of the 12 Step Pilgrimage program that has been held at different times in our archdiocese. At one particular pilgrimage, two sisters washed each others feet and dried them with their hair. That scene was a striking and moving image for all the participants who viewed it. They were vividly reminded of the woman who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and dried them with her hair, so grateful was she for the forgiveness he had shown her.

Tonight, we remember what Jesus did, and we enter into this same spirit of anointing and washing. Having been anointed in baptism, we now bend and wash each other's feet, as a symbol of following Jesus and serving as he did – loving others as he has loved us, through compassionate forgiveness and humble service.

This Eucharist that we celebrate tonight, Holy Thursday, is above all a memorial meal and thanksgiving sacrifice. We remember what Jesus did. We proclaim his death, his ultimate act of service for the world. We are forgiven, strengthened, and empowered to go out and to give our lives now in humble service as he did. As we celebrate this evening, may we remember, and live.