

The Inclusive Community

April 9, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Holy Thursday

I Corinthians 11:23-26 and John 13: 1-15

This is a special night for memories and for meanings.

The first reading, from I Corinthians, is the oldest written account we have of what happened at dinner in the final night of the life of Jesus. It is written around the year 55, some 17 years after the death of Jesus and fully 15 years before the first Gospel, Mark, was written. Peter was still alive when this account was written (he dies 9 years later in 64) and John is still alive (he dies around 90). We cannot get much closer to the event of that last supper than these texts take us.

When Paul writes, less than 3 years after that night, it is clear the Christian community has a sharp memory of what happened and, indeed, has formulated a sacramental ceremony around that memory.

Paul ties themes of betrayal (“on the night when he was betrayed”) with themes of sacrifice and love (“this is my body...my blood...for you...remember me”).

It is all these, even when we do this service tonight. The same words; the same gestures; the same meaning; the same memory. We are at the cutting edge of death and life. Paul adds that the action of life, eating and drinking, is a proclamation of the death of Jesus until he comes.

John’s writing some 35 years later, gives us another memory of that night. He is the only Gospel writer who does not speak of the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the wine. He gives us instead one of the most touching scenes not only in biblical literature but in literature itself.

Jesus, the Master, the Messiah, Son of God, kneels at the feet of his disciples and washes their feet. The scene is so jolting, so humbling, so beyond all definitions and expectations of what a Rabbi, a teacher, and those who learn from him would do, that Peter protests. The same Peter who once said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” now asks “Lord are you going to wash my feet?” When Jesus says “Yes,” Peter responds: “You will never wash my feet.” “Unless I wash your feet, you and I have nothing more in common.” This is intense language, on the night before crucifixion. Peter reacts with a breath-taking act of faith. “Lord, if that is what is at stake, then wash my hands and head.”

The whole memory of what it is to be a Christian, a disciple, is tied up in this one night. Death is only hours away. The same hands of Jesus, soon to be tied together as he is arrested, soon to be nailed to the cross as he dies, these hands break bread and offer wine and wash the feet of those he loved. The arrest will pass and Jesus will be taken from the cross but these gestures will be repeated, re-enacted through all the centuries until he comes again.

In the bread and wine, we enter into communion with Jesus and Christ, into communion with all those believers who find meaning in these simple actions of love. Jesus tells us what these actions symbolize. They deal with memory and sacrifice; in the washing of the feet, they remind us that “I,... Lord and Teacher have washed your feet... I have set you an example...”

Not long after this, he dies,

We gather tonight with bread and wine. In many Christian churches tonight, the presider at this ceremony will wash the feet of those who come to worship.

We say that the Christian community is born at Pentecost, some two months after this night. Yet all that the Spirit brings us as a community is a reminder of the memories and the example of that night.

In a great irony, this night of betrayal is meant to banish all betrayal as we love one another and metaphorically wash one another's feet. We cannot betray if we truly love. In a further irony, the night of shadows and sorrows, with death nearby, symbolized by broken bread and poured out wine, this night is a sacramental celebration of the fact that love is stronger than death and that Jesus cannot be banished from life.

Death is what we see. But the unseen presence of the Lord of life cannot be annulled by death.

Every person whom we have ever loved , we go on loving even after their death. Death does not stop love. In this bread and wine, in the water of washing and healing, in the breath we breathe and the memories we keep, in the faith and friendship which brought us here, in the Spirit we feel in our hearts, in the love we sense for one another, in all this we affirm that love is stronger than death and that all the fragments of our lives will be gathered up, nothing of value lost, by a God who will not let us perish.