

Homily for Maundy Thursday 2018 (29/3/18)

The Eucharist is such a great gift! It's so important that the institution of the Eucharist is recorded in the first three Gospels, as well as in 1 Corinthians which we heard this evening in the second reading. In the account in Luke, Jesus begins by saying, "I have longed to eat this passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15), or in another translation, "I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer". Such was Jesus' great love with which He gave us the Mass.

As well as instituting the Mass, at this point, Christ also instituted the priesthood, to carry out the celebration of the Mass, and in St John's account, which we read today, we see that service is an essential component. It means that at times certain cultural ideas of what is appropriate or not appropriate need to be crushed. Simon Peter was scandalised that Christ should kneel down and perform the duty of a slave, washing their feet. But when he got the idea, he then became so enthusiastic he wanted to be washed all over. The priesthood is one of radical service of others. St John Vianney used to say, "The priest is not a priest for himself, he is a priest for you". When I've explained celibacy to people, I've often said that a priest does something similar to a monk – he gives his whole life over to God. But he does so as a celibate, not as a bachelor. Celibacy means being completely available to others. It wouldn't be appropriate for a priest to say, "If Stoke are playing, woe betide anyone who dares to phone me or turn up at the door".

A priest, or a bishop, who takes the command to serve seriously, also has much more of an impact. When I was getting ready to be ordained to the priesthood, the Archbishop invited me to his house so he could get to know me a bit and take a few notes to use for his ordination homily. I arrived at the door and was greeted by Sister Luke. She made me a cup of tea, and I think there might have even been a teapot too, as it was given to me on a serving tray. I was rather nervous about meeting the Archbishop, who had only been in this diocese a few months, but when he arrived, he said something along the lines of, "let's go in to the next room", and he took the tea tray with him. That gesture put me completely at ease. He wasn't a prince who expected to be served and who would get irritated as the smallest mistake in etiquette.

The priesthood involves joy in giving your whole life over to God and serving others. St John Paul II put it this way:

“Young people, have you ever thought of committing your existence totally to Christ? Do you think there can be anything greater than to bring Jesus to people and people to Jesus?”

It is a privilege, in the right sense of the word, to be called by the Lord to serve as a priest. Not “privilege” in the sense of being reserved to the upper classes of society. There have been many priest-saints who grew up in poverty. But it’s a great privilege to be called by the Lord to serve Him as a priest. It’s not for everyone, and most people are not called to be priests. But for those that are, this is the way they will have the maximum fulfillment in their lives.

What is a priest, then? Is he just someone who performs a task, just like a groundsman who cuts the grass? St John Paul II again:

“The world looks to the priest because it looks to Jesus! No one can see Christ; but everyone sees the priest, and through him they wish to catch a glimpse of the Lord! Immense is the grandeur and dignity of the priest.”

A certain non-Catholic has said to me, more than once, that in the Catholic Church, it seems that the people treat the priest like God. That’s maybe a slight exaggeration, but the priest is an incarnation of Christ in our midst, although he still retains his own personality, and faults.

The greatest thing a priest does, each day, is to celebrate the Mass. In the Mass, Christ works through him. The priest does not say, “This is Jesus’ Body”, but, “This is my Body”. Without the priest, there is no Eucharist, and parishes that have to share priests know this fact very well. Let me finish with some word from St John Paul the II for the final time:

“Pray, therefore, to the Lord of the harvest, that he send labourers into his harvest ... Considering that the Eucharist is the greatest gift our Lord gives to his Church, we must ask for priests, since the priesthood is a gift for the Church. We must pray insistently for this gift. *We must ask for it on our knees.*”