



Holy Thursday

Homily

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**Thursday 1 April 2021
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

The opening sentence of tonight's Gospel, while it is an introduction to the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, is also an introduction to the whole mystery of the suffering and death of Jesus. It is also, I think, a wonderful phrase for us to return to whenever we feel overburdened or discouraged or lost along the journey of our lives.

Jesus had always loved those who were his in the world but now he showed how perfect his love was.

As we have just heard immediately after having made this statement the gospel writer goes on to tell the story of the washing of the feet. Sadly, because of Covid-19 concerns, we will not be able to re-enact this extraordinary gesture of Jesus, but I hope these few words might help us understand its significance a little more.

The story of the washing of the feet is above all a story of humility and service. And it is this which makes it a story of love, for this is what love looks like: the one who truly loves is ready to put him or herself at the service of the one who is loved and to do so in simplicity, in humility and in self-forgetfulness. It is only when we understand this, I think, that we can fully appreciate the words of Jesus which come at the end of this story:

If I, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you.

In Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians, in which he reflects on the meaning of the suffering and death of Jesus, Saint Paul expresses the very same thought but invites us to go beyond imitating the particular example of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples to the deeper reality of **why** Jesus washed his disciples' feet. Saint Paul expresses it this way: *you must have in you the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.*

What Jesus did on the night of his Last Supper, fully conscious as he would have been of what awaited him, expresses what is deepest in his mind and heart. **He does what he does because he is who he is.** We might say, and it would be true to say, that from a human point of view he



was a man of the utmost integrity, fidelity and constancy. He understood that his life was meant to be a total and free gift of himself in love for the sake of God's people, in humble obedience to God's will. Jesus never strayed from his commitment to this, notwithstanding the temptations with which he was assailed at the beginning of his ministry, and the agony he was soon to undergo in the garden of Gethsemane.

For us, of course, unlike Jesus, the story of our lives is a mixed one in terms of our fidelity, constancy and integrity. In the depths of our hearts I believe there is a yearning to be the kind of person whose lives are deeply marked by these qualities. Goodness, truth and beauty will always ultimately be more attractive and more fulfilling than evil, lies and ugliness. The last six weeks of our Lenten journey have been given to us in order to confront this challenge of the gap which exists between who and what we **want** to be and who and what **we actually are**. Because of this Saint Paul's insistence that we should have in us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus might seem an impossible demand for him to make and an impossible ideal for us to strive for.

We would be right in thinking this way if we were to imagine that we are supposed to achieve this through our own efforts. But this, of course, is not the case. Tonight, as well as recalling the Lord's washing of the feet of his disciples, we also celebrate the institution of the Eucharist. This is the Lord's supreme gift to us and the remarkable invitation he holds out to us: *Make your home in me*, he says, *as I make my home in you*. The Lord comes to us under the appearances of bread and wine as food for our journey, as strength for our weakness, as a source of hope in our moments of despair, and as forgiveness for our sins. What we cannot do on our own - live in complete fidelity to the Lord - we can do with the help of his grace, with the help of his abiding presence. As Saint Paul says in one of his letters, *"I can do all things in him who strengthens me"* (Phil 4:13).

Tonight, as we begin our Easter Triduum, the Lord's gift of himself to us in the Eucharist is a reason for celebration, a reason for deep wonderment and gratitude, and the foundation for a hope that can sustain us through our darkest times. *"Do not be afraid,"* he says to us, *"I am with you to protect you."* It is the Lord who speaks. Believe him.