



## Holy Thursday

### Homily

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB  
Archbishop of Perth**

**Thursday 6 April 2023  
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

In the Old Testament, in the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses is recorded as saying to the people of Israel in an address which retells the story of their escape from slavery in Egypt:

*What other nation is there that has its gods so near to them as our God is to us?"*

Moses, of course, was speaking of the way God freed the Israelites from Pharaoh and led them through the desert to the Promised Land; they knew God was with them because by night they were accompanied by a pillar of flame and by day by a pillar of cloud.

This presence of God to his people was remarkable, but it was only a hint of the depths of God's desire to be with his people. That desire was fully realized in Jesus who was not only an extraordinary and, indeed, unique man of God, but rather *God among us as one of us*. God no longer needs to be encountered in fire and in cloud. He can be encountered, listened to, known and loved in Jesus. We meet him in the pages of the gospel, both when we read the gospels at home and when we listen to them proclaimed at Mass. We meet him in our fellow Christians, especially when they themselves are in love with the Lord and reveal his face to us by the way they talk and behave. But most of all we meet him in the Eucharist when we gather, as we have tonight, to do what Jesus did on the night before he was betrayed. Just as on that night he took bread, broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, *"Take this all of you and eat of it, for this is my body which will be given up for you"* so at every Mass the priest, in the name of Jesus, will do the same. And just as Jesus took the chalice and offered it to his disciples saying *"take this all of you and drink from it for this is the chalice of my blood which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins"* so the priest, in Jesus' name, will do the same.

The priest a little later will lift up the consecrated host, the Lamb of God, and call us to come forward for the Supper of the Lamb. And in response to the Lord's invitation we will step out of our seats and approach the altar. At that moment it would be good to remember the words of Jesus in St John's gospel: *"When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself"*. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist the Lord fulfills this promise: he draws us, all of us together as a community, to himself so that we can do what he invites us to do in another part of John's gospel: *"Make your home in me as I make my home in you."* And then, as we return to our seats,



we will know how truly Moses spoke when he said *“what other people has its gods so close as our God is to us?”*

This closeness of God to us in Jesus takes on a rather startling aspect in the story of the Last Supper which we find in Saint John’s gospel. Here there is no account of the Lord’s sharing of his body and blood under the appearances of bread and wine. The writer of John’s gospel knew that this was already firmly established in the minds of the early Christians through the other gospel accounts. Instead, John’s gospel wants to remind us of what this gift of Jesus to us in the Eucharist is all about. The Lord gives himself to us so that we can be his ongoing presence in the world: and the purpose of that presence is dramatically made clear when Jesus, who is, as he says, our *Lord and master*, washes the feet of his disciples, making himself not just their Lord but their humble servant.

At the time of Moses the presence of the Lord was made known through the miraculous pillar of flame by night and the miraculous pillar of cloud by day. At the time of Jesus, many were expecting that the presence of the Lord would be made known through the Messiah who would come as a liberator, freeing the Chosen People from Roman oppression.

Through the mystery of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and through his sending of the Holy Spirit on the early Church at Pentecost, the first Christian communities finally came to understand that the presence of the Lord was now to be made known through the preaching of and witness to the gospel. What this really means is that the presence of the Lord is now, in our own time, to be made known through the faithful lives of Christians who put themselves, in imitation of Jesus, at the humble service of their brothers and sisters – which is to say, at the service of anyone in need.

When Jesus at the Last Supper says to his disciples, *“Do this in memory of me”*, he does not only mean that we should continue to celebrate the Eucharist. He also means that, through this celebration, we must allow him to live in us so that we, like him, can be the foot-washers of all those in need. It is also this we must do in memory of him. And it will be in this way that the people of our time might be able to see, and perhaps even to say, *“What other people is there that has its god so near as their God is to them?”*