

Homily for 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

By Fr Steele Hartmann

On that night of the Lord's Last Supper, St John tells us that the Lord 'got up from table, removed his outer garment and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist. He then poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing.' When he had finished he said to them, "I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you." (John 13:5, 15) Here in today's Gospel we have a woman doing just as Jesus commanded us. These two stories of a shared meal have much to teach us, for they are two ways of looking at that same event for which we do gather here together today: our common life together, symbolised in our coming together to break bread.

At the Last Supper it is the Lord who washes their feet. Simon Peter says to the Lord, "Never! You shall never wash my feet." Often our own sense of unworthiness, our own self-rejection, can prevent us from accepting the love offered us. It's converse, a sense of superiority — masking, no doubt, an even greater sense of inferiority — can equally hold us back from receiving the love that is poured out for us: Simon the Pharisee could never let this woman wash his feet, for he knows who this woman is and what a bad name she has. (Luke 7:39) In the former case, it is the Lord who washes; in the latter it is the Lord who is washed. The reality is that, when we gather at the Lord's Table, it is BOTH the Lord who washes and the Lord who is washed. For he has said simply, "Where two or three meet in my name, I am in their midst." (Matthew 18:20) In this we can begin to truly appreciate what was said of Jesus: He ate and drank with sinners. (e.g. Mark 2:15) For it is also BOTH the sinner who washes and the sinner who is washed. It is here in this gathering that the Lord is invited to dine (Luke 7:36); he is in our midst.

In our serving and being served, in our loving and being loved, we are called to recognise the Lord who is with us. "You see this one here?" the Lord says to us, whether we are serving or being served. "What you do to this least one of mine, you do to me." (Luke 7:44; Matthew 25:40) There is no distinction between the one serving and the one being served: both are the Lord. (Galatians 3:28) It is the one at table who gets up and washes our feet. The Lord says to us, "You call me Lord and Master, and rightly so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet." (John 13:13-14) This is our call: to be Lord and Master and servant of all. (Matthew 20:24-28) Here St Benedict words are a good guide to us, in our endeavour to live the common life: "[They] should by turn serve one another's needs as they eat and drink, so that no one need ask for anything." "They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other, supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behaviour, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead what he judges better for someone else." (Rule of St Benedict 38:6; 72:4-7)

The Psalm reminds us that our eyes, being the eyes of a servant, are always to be fixed on the hand of our Lord. (Psalm 123:1-2) In our loving service of one another, our rule and guide must always be: "Let your will be done, not mine." (Luke 22:43) I had always thought of these words of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as a prayer directed to his God and Father. But now, in light of the God in our midst, I see them as directed towards us. Perhaps our time of greatest testing is in our being together. (Luke 22:46; Mark 1:12-13) In Jesus on the cross we see one with whom we have had our way. We have great power. It is as the Psalmist notes: we are made little less than gods. (Psalm 82:6) In Jesus on the cross we see one in whom our will was done — no wonder he prays, "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?" (Mark 15:34) We sin against the God who is with us when we do not make him present in our gathering, through our loving care and mutual service of one another. We sin against the God who is with us when we take to 'abusing his servants' instead of recognising ourselves as fellow servants. (Matthew 24:45ff) We sin against the God who is with us when we do not say to the God in our midst what he has taught us to say: "Your will be done, not mine." (Matthew 6:10)

Jesus has warned us that things will not always be as they ought: "A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too; if they kept my word they will keep yours as well." (John 15:20) So we must not get too upset when things go wrong: "I have told you all this so that your faith may not be shaken ... so that when the time for it comes you may remember that I told you." (John 16:1, 4) As a servant, we must expect that our fellow servant will treat us badly from time to time — just as we ourselves do fail them every now and then. But this is not a call to retaliate or to walk away. Rather it is a call to absorb the hurt into ourselves instead of passing it on: Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing. (Luke 23:34) We are to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. (Matthew 7:12) Peter asked Jesus, "How many times must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?" The Lord answered, "Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:21-22) It seems that not only do we sin against our sister and brother, and they against us, but that we do sin often! "If he wrongs you seven times a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I'm sorry,' you must forgive him." (Luke 17:4)

It is only our forgiveness of one another that permits us STILL to gather. But it is the plenitude of our forgiveness that lets us know how greatly we are loved — for who but one who loves us would put up with us as we are? In this we can and will rejoice and be glad. (Luke 6:23) And in this we perform an even greater work (John 14:12), for it is as Jesus pointed out this morning: It is the one who is forgiven much who shows great love. (Luke 7:47) In our forgiving and being forgiven we learn the way of love that is humble and that can recognise what is holy in our midst. This will see us do what we must and do what we can to return the love. Thus are we launched into the Lord's service. Over time we will find that our love for one another does grow, until at last it has become like that of which St Paul speaks: "Let your love be unhyprocritical, abhorring evil, clinging to the good, loving one another dearly with fraternal love, outdoing one another in showing honour, in

zeal not lazy, in spirit burning, the Lord serving, in hope rejoicing, in tribulation enduring, in prayer persevering, to the needs of the saints contributing, hospitality practising." (Romans 12:9-13) Then of us it will be said, "You see this one here. I tell you that her sins, her many sins, must have been forgiven her, or she would not have shown such great love." (Luke 7:44, 47)

Let me close, giving the Lord, the one here in our midst, the last word: "My little children, ... I give you a new commandment: Love one another; just as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this love you have for one another everyone will know you are my disciples." (John 13:34-35)