

HOLY THURSDAY Year C

Francisco de Zurbaran's painting entitled "The Bound Lamb" shows a lamb with horns lying on a stone slab with its feet bound together. Whilst the horns give an impression of strength, the lamb appears vulnerable, gentle and innocent. Although it has been bound, there is no sense of struggle or fighting but rather submission and surrender. It is unblemished and unstained. The alternative title for the painting is "Agnus Dei" – Lamb Of God. The lamb symbolizes Christ who is bound to the cross and gives himself for the life of the world. His sacrifice on the cross gives us the gift of the Eucharist as his body is broken and his blood poured out.

Holy Thursday celebrates the New Passover. Jesus gives his life on the cross to free men and women from sin. As part of this gift he gives his body and blood to strengthen and nourish those who follow him and believe in him. In the eucharistic prayer, there are two transformations by the Holy Spirit; bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ; the people are transformed to become more fully the Body of Christ. St. Augustine understood that the people who gather around the altar and receive the body and blood of Christ become the Body of Christ more fully in order to serve others and to be the presence of Christ in the world. This is symbolized by Jesus washing the feet of disciples. It is the sign of the lowly and humble love of a servant who loves those he serves.

Washing another's feet is a humbling task. It is an intimate act as flesh touches flesh and shows tenderness and care. In particular, helping wash the body of a person who is elderly is an act of love. Christ called his followers to wash those who are weak and vulnerable and to show them love. By helping others with humility, we become the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

GOOD FRIDAY Year C

One of the final scenes in a medieval Passion Play is the appearance of the risen Jesus to the apostles. The apostles, eleven of them, are sitting in a circle on the ground. The mood is sad and whilst they discuss the events of recent days, an atmosphere of deep mourning and grief overshadows the group. There is one gap in the circle; it is the place where Judas used to sit, usually in the same place between two friends. The Risen Christ begins to walk around the outside of the circle and touches each of the disciples on the head; John, Peter, James and then the others. He reaches the gap where Judas should be, stops, thinks and then caresses the empty space. He places his hand on the place where Judas' head should be. He knows his size and shape like a friend or a parent. He then caresses the empty space down to the back. Slowly he moves on.

The scene in the play suggests the deep and tender love which Jesus felt for Judas and the sadness of the betrayal for Jesus. He had been hand-picked, one of the Twelve, one who had chosen to follow Jesus, but there had always been a doubt – would he be faithful? Sadly he would not. However, in God's plan even this action enabled Jesus to reveal that he would not stop loving. God so loved the world that God sent his only begotten Son to be the Saviour of all people by his cross and resurrection. In spite of Judas' betrayal, God continued to love him. Judas had chosen to betray him. That was possible because he had been given the gift of freedom.

Good Friday speaks of the love which God has for each person. The most scandalous sinner is invited to repent and return to God. Forgiveness is unbounded for the one who is sincere. Can I believe in God's infinite mercy towards me, for those I find hard to forgive? This is the mystery of Good Friday. As we move to the cross in veneration, we are invited to place at the feet of Jesus – pain, hurt, sorrow, anger, sin and failure. The gentle Jesus is there to caress our heads and God is there to welcome each one home.

EASTER VIGIL **Year C**

Waiting is part of the human condition. People who find it difficult to sleep wait restlessly for the dawn. The watchman longs for the end of night and the end of the watch. Waiting is necessary for healing. Wounds need time to heal and have a cycle of their own. They cannot be rushed. Healing after an operation takes time and a period of convalescence. Waiting can be an anxious and often painful experience: a time of worrying about suspected illness, the future, the unknowns of the process and concerns about when a hospital bed will be free. Human growth, whether physical, psychological or spiritual, takes time and involves periods of waiting for change. The healing of grief requires a long time of waiting. Human waiting comes to an end and there is a sense of relief.

Holy Saturday is a day of waiting in the Church's calendar. The Church is empty and bare. It is stripped of decoration and feels empty. There is something missing. The Tabernacle doors are open and the Blessed Sacrament is not there. The feeling of emptiness is like that which follows a death. It is full of memories. The emptiness of Holy Saturday has provided an opportunity to wait and reflect on the events of Holy Week. We have longed for nightfall so that we can gather round the paschal fire and celebrate new life.

For the apostles and disciples of Jesus, waiting comes to an end as they experience the resurrection. Suddenly the grief and mourning of Jesus' death is over and he appears to them in a risen state. They feel joy and peace. It is a moment of triumph and victory. The great day of waiting is over. Christ has risen triumphant from the grave.

Whilst many moments of human life are difficult – sickness, grief, imprisonment, loss of friends, loneliness, struggling for justice in a situation of oppression, spreading the truth when the cost is high – the promise of the resurrection is that God will triumph. Martin Luther King whilst struggling for justice for Afro-Americans endured suffering, rejection and death. He knew from his Christian faith that he must live the Good Friday of suffering and the emptiness of Holy Saturday, but that Easter Sunday would dawn. It would be an unending day of everlasting joy. This is the hope of our celebration this night.