

Homily by Fr David Oakley
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We have gathered here in this evening light, our hearts' desire to encounter truth, not an intellectual idea or an ethical behaving, but the truth who is a person, a Lord and Master who by the sign he gives, shows himself to be a foot-washing servant. And in this sign, Jesus brings us to know that discipling him is not just about loving someone new but a new way of loving. Through this serving sign, Jesus lives out what it means to name himself the Way, the Truth and the Life.

It is within this serving action then, we ponder three mysteries: the institution of the Holy Eucharist, the priestly Order, and the commandment of the Lord concerning fraternal charity. In different, but related ways, all these are living signs in today's world, of what it means for us to know the Lord and Master, the one who shows us how perfect his love was.

In this hour, indeed *the* hour, when Jesus will pass from this world to the Father, there is no mention in John's Gospel of broken bread and a chalice poured out. We who are so used to thinking of the Eucharistic presence of Jesus as a holy *thing*, must reflect on *this* mystery; the Eucharistic presence here is a holy *action*, a serving of each other, born out of the Lord's service of us. In this serving, the only mention of bread in the fourth Gospel is the bread dipped in the dish and given to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon.

To understand the eucharistic banquet, we must return to those Greeks who wished to see Jesus. If we too wish to

see Jesus, then we must receive his words to them, 'the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.' This is the new way of loving, Jesus offers us tonight: the only way, those called to be priests of the new covenant can understand their life and ministry.

To enter into this priesthood is to enter into a life of verbs rather than nouns. Call to mind the words of the apostle Paul to us, he has *received* from the Lord and *passes* on to us. And then the eucharistic verbs, the Lord Jesus *took* some bread, *thanked* God for it and *broke* it. The priestly life then, is one of thanksgiving, broken in service for others. Any other version is counterfeit, a parody. For this is what the Way, the Truth and the Life shared with us, 'I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you'.

When we make of ourselves a thanksgiving sacrifice, then we become missionary disciples. And a missionary disciple does not 'work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life'. Only then can we understand the meaning of Jesus' words, 'I am the bread of life'. And this living bread tells us himself in the Gospel, 'I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me'. How easy it is for those who are content all too often to eat stale bread, to dwell in the place of old ideas and forms, to shun that living bread who compels us to become missionaries of charity to others.

So how can we avoid this working for food that spoils? There is a Gospel line from Capernaum, where Jesus

names himself the living bread, that synagogue where 'many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him', to the place of sacrifice on Calvary, the Cross from which even most of the twelve turned away. But this line travels through an upper room, a place where 'the evening meal was being served', and where the Bread of Life 'got up from the meal took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.' As blood and water would pour out the following day from a Sacred Heart pierced with a lance, so in this eucharistic moment, 'he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet'.

And if we hear the command, 'do this as a memorial of me', then these words cannot be separated from another command, 'you should wash each others' feet'. How often the cry goes up, what should we do, a cry often followed by much wringing of hands as we wonder what foot-washing service might mean in our world today? This cry remains unanswered, not because of a shortage of ideas, a lack of desire to get involved, but because there is a stubborn resistance within, an echo of Simon Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet'. Why is this? We might expect Pope Francis to teach us that the Eucharist leads us to service of the poor, to lead us to recognise our need for God's mercy and a desire to share forgiveness with others. And indeed he does. But he also says this, 'Let us live the Eucharist in a spirit of faith and prayer, with the certainty that the Lord will bring to fulfilment all that he has promised.' And that's the point, we are not celebrating here what we have done, but what the *Lord* has done. This Eucharistic Banquet, this Eucharistic serving love, we will celebrate in memorial, until the Lord comes again.