

Looking Back from the Cross to the Supper

- Holy Thursday, 2016
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As we enter together into these three holiest days as the pivot of our Christian faith, let's see if we can make more real how Jesus himself entered into these days in his humanity and in his love for us. We rightfully think of this Mass of the Lord's Supper as the original Eucharistic banquet which we so treasure and enjoy from week to week. What, however, was the experience and feelings and willing attitude of Jesus himself as he gathered with his disciples this evening?

The gospel for tonight—leading to and explaining the “why” of his washing of his disciples' feet and the breaking of the bread—says:

Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end.

Jesus knew that his hour had come. What did this feel like to him, what did he wrestle with, what did he submit to and accept? What mood or attitude did he have deep within himself, even obsessing him, as he washed his disciples feet, entered into this meal with them, turning in love toward them and toward us before his agony, his passion, and his tortured, humiliated death through brutalizing crucifixion? The whole of these days were certainly with him—as they should be with us—on his mind, in his feelings, churning in him as it would churn in any of us faced with what he knew was coming, even as he turned in love towards the Father and turned toward us in compassion for us while he did not himself experience any compassion?

The poet Denise Levertov ponders what this personal experience of Jesus most deeply might have been as she contemplates his face as presented to us in art:

Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis

Maybe He looked indeed
much as Rembrandt envisioned Him
in those small heads that seem in fact
portraits of more than a model.
A dark, still young, very intelligent face,
a soul-mirror gaze of deep understanding, unjudging.
That face, in extremis, would have clenched its teeth
in a grimace not shown in even the great crucifixions.
The burden of humanness (I begin to see) exacted from Him
that He taste also the humiliation of dread,
cold sweat of wanting to let the whole thing go,
like any mortal hero out of his depth,
like anyone who has taken a step too far

and wants herself back.
 The painters, even the greatest, don't show how,
 in the midnight Garden,
 or staggering uphill under the weight of the Cross,
 He went through with even the human longing
 to simply cease, to not be.
 Not torture of body,
 not the hideous betrayals humans commit
 nor the faithless weakness of friends, and surely
 not the anticipation of death (not then, in agony's grip)
 was Incarnation's heaviest weight,
 but this sickened desire to renege,
 to step back from what He, Who was God,
 had promised Himself, and had entered
 time and flesh to enact.
 Sublime acceptance, to be absolute, had to have welled
 up from those depths where purpose
 drifted for mortal moments.

So great was the human temptation, almost compulsion, to renege, to not go through with it, to find another way, to get around by a different path than the passion, crucifixion and abandonment to the Father, to come to him by an easier path than this one; to save us more serenely. This one, however, was the one destined for him, not by some will of the Father, but destined for him simply by living to the end his truth, his love, where his life, words and actions were taking him. The passion and crucifixion are where being true to himself was inevitably leading if he was to see it through all the way to the end, to love to the end. The Father did not will it as some culminating way the story should end, as some externally imposed climax. The Father willed his Son, Jesus, to be Jesus and to be true to himself to the end—that meant passion and crucifixion as a consequence to the faithful love of Jesus. (So, too, we might acknowledge that God does not will some external end of our lives for us but wills us also to be true to the end to who we are and to whatever that involves and to accept that with love, not to renege.)

Holy Thursday and the Lord's Supper is not for us—as it was not for Jesus—only this meal, but the whole of how this going to the end in these days meant and felt and preoccupied him, was on his pulse, felt in his heart, showed on his face. In this situation to look with love upon his disciples—even to think of them and not of himself—in washing their feet and breaking bread with them to so look in love on others when snagged in the snare of anxiety is the real proof of his love for them, for us, and for the Father. It's as if already tonight he looks back and down from the wood of the cross on this night and on these companions, on us in this Eucharist.

A very moving experience in my life as a Jesuit got lodged in my feelings and reveals something of what I want to say as we enter into the washing of the feet and the banquet. I participated in an international gathering of 223 Jesuits in Rome in 1995. At one moment in that gathering during a Eucharist, a Jesuit from Australia made a presentation, a gift. The year before, in 1994, at the Jesuit retreat house in Kigali, Rwanda, three Jesuits, several nuns and many other Rwandans were massacred by machetes in the chapel of that retreat house during the Rwandan

genocide. An Australian journalist entered that chapel a few days later to see corpses spread everywhere. He noticed a small crucifix on the wall of the chapel which had, as it were, looked on this scene of utter brutality and sacrifice. He took the crucifix from the wall, put it in his bag, and took it back to Australia. He gave it to the Jesuits there. It was thus that an Australian Jesuit, in Rome a year later, made a gift during the Eucharist with the 223 of us. He called forth the leader of the Rwandan Jesuits—one who had survived only because he was out of the country at the time of the genocide—and he presented to him the crucifix that had hung on the wall of the retreat house chapel and had witnessed the massacre of his brothers, the sisters, and the faithful. I and others were moved to tears. Imagine: the face of the loving figure on the cross looking back from a witnessed sacrifice on a bereft but saved brother and on us Jesuit companions during a Eucharist or Last Supper!

Something of that moving experience opens up and is true this night. The loving face—what Levertov calls “*that face*”—looks upon us, not renegeing, because not going back on loving to the end. This is the real Jesus, the true Jesus, who washes our feet and shares his body and blood with us tonight, asking us in the coming days to go the whole way with him and so to know and to accept his love for the Father, for us and for all.