



## Maundy Thursday 2021

*'Your servant, Lord, your servant am I.'*

Dear Friends

These words of the psalmist touch us deeply as we accompany the Lord Jesus in His passion. The *'suffering servant,'* foretold by the Prophet Isaiah, tonight begins His journey from the Last Supper towards Calvary and the cross. Every time we celebrate the Mass, when we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the death of Him who came not to be served, but to serve. But what does it mean to call the Lord Jesus a *'servant'*?

Talk of servants conjures up the stuff of *Upstairs, Downstairs* or *Downton Abbey*. Dressed in black and white, the servant does what's commanded, speaking only when spoken to. For centuries, people have worked honourably *'in service,'* with professionalism and with dedication. But the service of the Lord Jesus is not like any other servant before or after.

St Paul's account of the Lord Jesus instituting the Eucharist, and St John's description of Him washing feet, dovetail into a unique ceremony. In the context of the Passover festival, the Lord Jesus take the bread and declares it to be His Body. Then, He takes the cup of wine and proclaims it to be His Blood. Ever since, we have taken the Lord Jesus at His word. *'Do not doubt whether this is true,'* says St Cyril of Alexandria, *'rather receive the words of the Saviour in faith, for since He is the truth, He cannot lie.'* The Lord Jesus is really and truly present in the Eucharist because he said so.

Within this Eucharistic setting, the Lord Jesus assumes the condition of a servant and washes His disciples' feet. What He commanded us to do in the Mass – *'in remembrance of him'* – is bound to His example of service – *'so that you may copy what I have done to you.'*

If we struggle to understand what it means for the Lord Jesus to fulfil the role of a servant in this way, we find good company with those seated with Him at table the night before He died. The streets in His time were often strewn with sewage and

manure. Arriving at someone's house, the guest's soiled feet would be washed clean by the lowliest servant, usually a slave. Just taken at face value, for Christ the kingdom-announcer, the miracle-maker, the dead-raiser, to do this was shocking for the disciples. Rather than showing humility, it spoke of humiliation, something intolerable for Simon Peter who tells the Lord Jesus he can never wash his feet. But there's more going on here.

In the biblical world, the hands and feet symbolically represented someone's activity. Washing someone's hands or feet not only cleansed them on a physical level. It touched them more profoundly, washing away any guilt caused by their wrongdoing. It's this belief which motivates Pontius Pilate when he washes his hands before the crowd and protests he is innocent in the shedding of the Lord's blood.

For His disciples, this washing by Jesus was an act of absolution. In the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI: *'The bath that cleanses ... is Jesus' love to the point of death.'* This image of the servant kneeling to wash feet *'signifies the whole of Jesus' saving ministry.'* In reaching down to eradicate the foulest dirt the Lord Jesus witnesses, in anticipation, to the forgiveness that will gush from the cross to heal even the darkest sin. For Pope Benedict, this healing touches us personally in the Sacrament of Reconciliation: *'In confession,'* he writes *'the Lord washes our soiled feet over and over again and prepares us for table fellowship with him.'*

The entire mission and ministry of the servant Lord Jesus, signalled by him washing His disciples' feet, leads to the Eucharist and the cross where gives of Himself and He pardons. The purifying water, poured out over the disciples' feet, points to His blood, shed that sins might be forgiven. When the Lord Jesus stooped down lower than any other to make us clean, He then asked us to do the same: to serve as we are served; to forgive as we are forgiven; to show mercy as mercy has been shown to us. Only in this way can we have anything in common with Him.

*'Your servant, Lord, your servant am I.'* For the Lord Jesus, love and mercy are the centre of everything. They are the blueprint for discipleship and every vocation. To call the Lord Jesus a servant is to assert it is impossible for Him not to love or to forgive. If we are to follow His example, the same must be said of us.

*Lord Jesus Christ,*

*on this holy night,*

*when we keep watch with you in the garden*

*and honour your Real, True and Living presence in the most Holy Eucharist, teach us to serve and love like you,*

*our hearts overflowing with forgiveness and mercy.*

*'Your servant, Lord, your servant am I.'*

**The Hope Within You**

Homilies, Reflections, Pastoral Letters, Messages and Articles on the Catholic Faith and Christian Life – Archbishop John Wilson