

Holy Thursday, 2014

1. Why is this night different from all other nights?

The Last Supper in John's Gospel extends for five chapters. Everything that happens at the meal prepares Jesus' closest disciples for the events that will follow and teaches them about Jesus' enduring relationship with them: the washing of the disciples' feet, the prediction of Judas' betrayal and Peter's denials and the lengthy supper discourse all reveal something to the disciples about Jesus and about themselves.

This question as to why this night is different from all other nights opens for those who have gathered for the Passover supper a retelling of what God did to free his people from physical and spiritual slavery.

And as a consequent, this sacred meal gives the Jews their identity.

And the meal we celebrate this evening gives us our identity, with each of the gospel writers painting an amazing picture of our Lord's Last Supper.

Matthew, Mark and Luke emphasize the institution of the Eucharist, when Jesus offers us his Body and Blood and asks us to eat and drink "in memory of me."

But John focuses upon the washing of feet, which brings to mind the image of the Suffering Servant.

Both components of the Last Supper are incredible events that should shape our Christian lives.

So, why is this night different from all other nights?

Few incidents in scripture so reveal the character of Jesus and so perfectly show his love, a love that challenges us to servant leadership.

Mothers and Fathers practice servant leadership when caring for their children: they protect them physically and emotionally suffer every time their child strikes out at bat or doesn't get a roll in the school play. Parents show their love in the details of everyday life.

But Business people have also been challenged to put this religious idea into practice in the workplace, even though it reverses the usual hierarchical model. If bosses saw themselves as the servants of their employees, that would affect many of their decisions about workloads, pensions, hiring/firing and the work environment. Servant leadership asks that leaders see things from their employees' point of view.

2. Returning to the Last Supper, Jesus knew that his hour of humiliation was near, but he also knew that his hour of glory was near as well.

Such a consciousness might well have filled him with pride.

But at that moment when he might have had supreme pride, he had supreme humility.

Love is like that...

Again, when people fall ill, those who love them will perform the most menial services and delight in doing them because true love does not allow us to shy away from service, regardless of personal inconvenience.

Sad to say, some people think that they are too important to do menial tasks, but Jesus was not one of them.

He knew that he was Lord of all, and yet he washed his disciples' feet—what a powerful teaching this is for us all!

Jesus knew that he had come from God and that he was going to God.

And it was just at that time when God was nearest to him that Jesus expressed his extraordinary love for us, sinners one and all.

Why is this night different from all other nights?

Well because of his example, Jesus taught us that the nearer we are to suffering humanity, the nearer we are to God.

Recall Matthew 25: 37-41 when we read: Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the King will tell them: I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me... and when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me."

What is so amazing is that even though Jesus knew that he was about to be betrayed by one of his closest associates, this knowledge did not turn his heart to bitterness and hatred.

It is so easy and natural for us to resent the wrong done to us—so much so that we can allow that negative power to take over our lives.

But Jesus met the greatest injury and the supreme disloyalty with the greatest humility and with supreme love.

The world is full of people who are standing on their dignity when they ought to be kneeling at the feet of their brothers and sisters.

When we are tempted to think of our injured dignity, our prestige or our rights, let us recall the picture of the Son of God, wrapped with a towel around his waist, kneeling at his disciples' feet.

3. Why is this night different from all other nights?

When Peter initially refuses to have his feet washed, he showed that he was nervous with Jesus being a suffering servant. He was uncomfortable with a humble leader; Peter preferred a dominant, forceful leader; someone who gave orders, not one who performed humble tasks. But when Jesus insisted upon the feet washing, Peter finally gets Jesus' point and he wants his head and hands washed as well. Jesus was simply trying to teach Peter and us something about the power of love.

All this is part of the upside-down kingdom that the Lord is ushering in. It's so radical a notion that it's part of the reason that got Jesus killed.

The kind of love that turns our lives inside out.

The kind of love that forgives when hurt by those who are closest to us.

The kind of love that tells us to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

Why is this night different from all other nights?

Because our celebration of the Lord's Supper provides us with an identity and a purpose. The reality of this night is the source and summit of our Christian journey.

By participating in this ritual, we join the apostles in facing Jesus' death and we begin to accept the path that leads to eternal life.

And that is why this night is different for all other nights...