

Mass of the Lord's Supper / Year A / April 9, 2020 (Fr. Giese)

There is a strange word that occurs in our second reading tonight. It is 'thanks'. It is not that the word itself is strange. 'Thanks' is a rather common word; one that we use regularly in one form or another such as 'Thanksgiving' and thank you. In fact, if you are texting someone and hit 't' and 'h' the auto spell will offer 'thanks' as a possibility because it is so often used at the end of messages. What makes 'thanks' so strange as it occurs in our second reading, which is from the first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians is that, as Paul is describing the last supper on the night when Jesus was handed over for torture and death on a cross, he says Jesus took bread and gave thanks before breaking it, then giving it to the apostles as his flesh to eat. Then he commands them to do the same in remembrance of him.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke also record how Jesus gave thanks before blessing the bread that would become his flesh and blessing the cup of wine that would become his blood and that Jesus did this the night before he was taken to be put on trial, suffer, and then be lifted up to die on the cross. Jesus was aware these things were coming and he still gave thanks and that is a mystery.

How could Jesus, with his suffering and crucifixion and death about to begin, give thanks? I mean, for most of us, giving thanks to God, does not come automatically under any circumstances. Very often we are so focused on what we need or believe we need or what we want or we are focused on the difficulties in which we find ourselves that giving thanks to God is not the first thing we are inclined to do in our relationship with God. The first thing is to usually ask for something, at least for many people. Giving thanks comes later, maybe much later, and then at moments of joy, prosperity, peace, happiness, success, achievement and times like that. Maybe giving thanks comes just once a year in late November on a holiday at a special meal with family and friends. We have all seen images of people sitting down in a beautiful setting, to a beautiful meal and all looking happy and thankful.

Those are the times and moments we are most likely to give thanks and not moments of stress, and difficulty, or challenge, or suffering. Stress and difficulty and challenge and pain are the things we want God to remove from our lives. We are not inclined to give thanks for them.

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How many of us would, six weeks ago, knowing what was ahead and where we would be now, still have given thanks for going through what we are going through now? Few, if any.

Yet, that is what Jesus did, in a sense. Knowing what was ahead, he still gave thanks as he gave his body and blood to his friends to consume so that they would have communion with him, be in communion with him. But again, why? Why did Jesus, with his passion about to begin, give thanks?

I believe that at that moment Jesus believed that he had many things for which he needed to thank the Father. I believe that Jesus gave thanks for the example of faith in the face of difficulty that Mary and Joseph had given him as he was growing up in their household that gave him courage to face what he was about to undergo. I believe that Jesus gave thanks for all the signs of power he had worked that had healed people so that he could go out and heal them of their greatest affliction, sin. I believe Jesus gave thanks for God's saving actions on behalf of his people and for the saving action that was now entrusted to him. I believe that he gave thanks for all the moments of intimacy in prayer with the Father that gave him the fortitude to go through with the will of God. I believe he gave thanks that he could give his life for others and reveal his love for them. I believe that all those things and more were in the heart of Jesus when he gave thanks that night of the last supper.

And right now, one of the most radical, distinctive things you can do to reveal the depth of your own Christian faith, would be to give thanks; to give thanks for what? Well, to give thanks that a time like this reveals strength and character, that a time like this reminds us of what is truly important in life, for living in a time when sacrifices people make for others can be clearly seen, and that for seeing how generosity is valued and patience is learned. I think many of you can give thanks for spending time with your family in a way you never did before and never will again and that this hard time will be like a rock of strength for your family, something you did together and strengthened your bonds. Another reason to give thanks is for the blessing of work and the ability to support yourself and your loved ones.

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I believe that you can give thanks for your faith in Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, who knows what suffering is and has brought that knowledge of human suffering into the Godhead itself. I believe that you can give thanks for knowing that when you give yourself to him you find that he gives himself to you without reserve because he has already given himself up for you. I believe that you can give thanks already for the Holy Communion you will have with him again in a heart most eager to receive him. I believe that you too, like Jesus, can give thanks to God.