

My reflection on Christ's Passion this Lent has been aided by a painting of Christ's Agony in the Garden. There in the midst of a dimly lit garden, Christ is illuminated by a thin beam of light from above. His body is contorted in agony while at the same time He is enraptured in prayer, opening one hand in offering while a chalice is poised to tip over and empty itself out. The dark background allows us to focus on this moment of supreme offering. In a way, today's mass of the Lord's Supper is similar to this painting because it also shines a light directly on the Eucharist allowing us to focus on this moment of supreme offering.

The readings chosen for this mass seek to bring us to the heart of the Eucharist. In our first reading from the Book of Exodus, we hear about the institution of the Passover meal. When the Israelites were still slaves in Egypt, God instructed them to gather together as a community for the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb. They must then eat of this sacrifice and use its blood to mark the doors of their home so that the angel of death will pass over them. They are told that "this day shall be a memorial feast for you, which all your generations shall celebrate with pilgrimage to the Lord as a perpetual institution."

From that day forward, observant Jews would gather yearly to celebrate this Passover meal, reliving the day when God set them free from death to life. It was during one such feast when Jesus took bread, and after giving thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way taking the cup, He said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

It was clear in that moment that Christ was doing something new, asking the Apostles to transform the Passover Feast into a memorial feast for Him. At best, this was confusing and at worst it was blasphemous. It was only after His future Death and Resurrection that His actions made sense.

Christ was not changing the Passover meal but fulfilling it. He is the true sacrificial lamb offered for sins so that God's people can be freed from death to life. Those who eat His flesh and drink His blood are marked so that the angel of death will pass them by. Reflecting on this, the Apostle Paul tells us "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes again."

A proclamation is in itself both a public manifestation of a belief to others and an invitation to others to share in that belief. So, what does it mean to proclaim the Lord's death? We find that answer in today's Gospel. Traditionally in the Passover meal, prior to the blessing of bread and wine the guests wash their hands in silence. Breaking with tradition, Jesus rose at this time and stripped off His outer garments before bending down to wash His disciples' feet. Afterwards, Jesus says, "Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do."

Just as Jesus willingly stripped off His garments to wash the disciples' feet at the Last Supper, He would later willingly strip off His garments one final time before He was crucified on the Cross. Every single time that we receive the Eucharist, we not only proclaim our belief in Christ but are also reminded that we are also called to strip ourselves as well and bend down to offer ourselves in service to others. As Paul said, "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes again."

The rubrics of this mass invite us to reflect on this in a very particular way. Very soon, I will strip myself of my vestments so that I might wash the feet of those who represent this community in imitation of Christ. For me, it is always a profound

moment when I am asked to recommit myself in service to God's people. At the same time, it is a clear invitation to each and every single one of us to live out this Eucharist by giving ourselves in service to others.

The rituals of today's service continue to deepen this invitation. Today is unique because we do not end with a blessing but a Eucharistic procession. In remembrance of Christ who was stripped of His garments, the altar is stripped bare and we process with the Eucharist to a tabernacle that recalls the Garden of Gethsemane. There, we are invited to watch and pray with the Lord in the same way that He once invited His disciples as He knelt down before them saying, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done."

At the heart of the Eucharist, we discover an invitation to completely abandon our will to our Father's. As Jesus attested through His agony, this is not easy. And yet, Christ found peace in His surrender and it was through this sacrifice that we found salvation. Likewise, we too will find peace in the midst of our self-offering for at that moment God will strengthen us so that we may continue to proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes again.

In the painting which I mentioned earlier, Christ is bathed in light even though He is surrounded by darkness. As Jesus once proclaimed, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Though our lives might be surrounded by darkness, when we partake of the Eucharist, marking ourselves with the Blood of the Lamb, and make of ourselves an acceptable offering through our service, we too will be filled with light that conquers every darkness.