

Homily Holy Thursday March 2018

Have you ever smelled wood burning? Perhaps it was a camp fire, perhaps the scent of a fireplace? Perhaps smoke from a neighbor's chimney in the winter drifts over to your back yard? The smell of wood burning is never the same because each particular type of wood has its own smell when it's burned so if you have an all oak fire it smells different from a fire of hemlock or spruce or apple wood.

So let me ask another more particular question about wood burning. Have you ever had a really good feeling at the same time you smelled wood burning? A warm kind of feeling? Maybe the smell of the smoke was extra sweet or fragrant? You know all our incense we use at mass is the sap from different types of trees and plants.

It might seem like a strange question to begin our Holy Thursday celebration with but on Passover night every Jewish family in Jerusalem had to cook a lamb for the evening meal and in those days people cooked with wood. A reasonably conservative figure (according to William Barclay) would be that there were about 250,000 wood fires burning on Holy Thursday evening in addition to the fire burning in the Upper Room when the apostles reclined at a table with Jesus to celebrate the Seder Meal.

So as we begin I want you to remember the smell of wood burning because the whole city was covered by a blanket of smoke on the first Passover night. There was no way to avoid the scent. We can assume since a fire was burning that there was a warm glow in the Upper Room where the disciples are gathered from the fire. There is a full moon so light is coming in through the windows. It is spring so comfortably warm in the Holy Land. People looked forward all year long for this celebration because families came together and everyone gathered around a table for a long ritual meal by candlelight. People kept their voices down because this was a special night. This was the night angels from heaven visited every home. This was the night a miracle happens for every Passover evening--- time itself opens up and Jews from all different centuries came together as one people. During the dinner stories will be told, songs will be sung, everyone will drink wine and different foods will be eaten.

The Seder meal is a sacred, a holy celebration where God's saving actions and blessings are recounted.

And here we are ---you and I--- gathered on this Passover night for the Seder.

Jesus gets up from the table takes off his outer garments and puts a towel around his waist. He pours water into a basin and goes one by one to each of the disciples and washes their feet. He dries their feet with the towel.

After he finishes he asks this disciples if they understand what he has done.

"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."

Some say this is one of the most powerful sermons Jesus ever preached and he does it without a spoken word. If the one who is greatest among us, Jesus, is willing to abase and

humble himself by washing another person's feet what does that tell us about how we must behave with one another?

Jesus returns to the table and then he does something which has captured the hearts and minds of people for two millennia.

Jesus takes bread, blesses it. *"Giving it to his disciples Jesus said, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.'" (Matthew 26:26-28)*

Jesus said earlier (John 6:54-58) "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever."

"Do this in memory of me."

Do what in memory of me?

Gather, say the blessing, make my flesh and blood present to the people of every age that they may have eternal life.

And so here we are tonight on the exact same night Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. Here we are on the first night ever Jesus changed ordinary bread and wine into his body and blood.

Here we are tonight when time itself opens up and we are one not only with all the Jews who ever gathered for Seder but we are one with all those who at any time has shared in the body and blood of Christ.

Tonight, smell the wood burning.

Listen to the story being told.

Sing the hymns.

Watch as the Lord washes your feet.

Eat his body and blood

A door has opened. Become one with the events of our Lord's life. Be a witness. Be with him as Jesus gives himself to us.