



Scripture sets the scene for this day in Holy Week. Jesus and his apostles journeyed to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. It is estimated that during Jesus' time Jerusalem had somewhere between 50,000-80,000 permanent residents. However, during Passover many Jews, not only from Palestine, but also from other regions throughout the whole Roman Empire, traveled to Jerusalem for the feast. Thus, during Passover the population in and around Jerusalem swelled to over 300,000 people.

At night these people camped out on the hills surrounding the city. Jesus and his apostles camped as well; they stayed about two miles outside the city, in Bethany, on the far slope of the Mount of Olives. During the day the city was clogged with these pilgrims. They came to celebrate the mercy of God who freed their ancestors from slavery in Egypt.

The Roman Governor Pilate knew that Passover was a very dangerous time of the year for Rome. The vast crowds that descended upon the city contained many who wanted a new prophet like Moses who would set them free from Roman rule. Not only that, they were a fearless bunch. Six or seven years earlier, when Pilate was first appointed Roman governor of Judea, he ordered his troops to raise flags with Caesar's image on them which they did within a few hundred feet of the temple. A mob of Jews marched to Pilate's home in Caesarea. His soldiers, in defense, drew their swords. And in a poignantly powerful act of passive resistance, the Jews exposed their necks to the swords and said that they would rather die than transgress God's law. Pilate backed down and removed the flags.

On the first day of this Passover week, Jesus entered Jerusalem surrounded by a crowd singing and waving palm branches fearlessly proclaiming Jesus, and not Caesar, as their king. But that wasn't all that Jesus did. If you follow the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, on the next day, Monday, Jesus made his way to the Temple, and in full view of the Roman soldiers, he began excoriating the money changers, overturning tables, and pushing people around, disturbing the peace of Rome in a very provocative way.

Caiaphas, the high priest, knew better than anyone else that Jewish revolts inevitably started at the Temple and occurred frequently during Passover week. To Caiaphas, Jesus and others who disturbed the peace were bad for the Temple, bad for the Romans, and bad for the Jews. On Tuesday of Passover week, Jesus was back in the Temple area, confronting the authorities, and defending his claim of Messiahship. On Wednesday, Jesus spent a quiet day in Bethany.

Like all the prophets before him, Jesus was praised by those who were lifted up by his mercy and compassion. On the other hand, the privileged felt threatened by him and they were determined to silence him. Jesus could clearly see the consequences of staying the course. His obedience was to divine love for all people, Jew and Gentile alike. His vocation was to release all who were bowed down by sin and suffering. It was a costly love that brought him to Jerusalem for the final week of his life.

On Thursday night he gathered those who were closest to him for a final meal. There were some



things he had to complete. In our second reading tonight, Paul recounts what happened at the meal. “On the night he was handed over, Jesus took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it, and said, ‘This is my body for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’” And Christians have been doing it ever since. From the catacombs of Rome where the first Christians broke bread in secret for fear of the Roman authorities, to the grandeur of the medieval cathedrals, to all those places where Viatorians have served and where they serve today, Jesus, the Christ, has been present in the breaking of the bread.

In our gospel reading we learn that after Jesus washed the feet of those at table with him he said, “I have given you a model to follow. What I have done for you, you must do for each other.” Tonight, in this liturgy, our provincial will wash feet to remember whose servant he is. But we too are called to wash feet in countless other ways. When we care for others in our Viatorian community in time of sadness and suffering, we serve them in a way very much like washing their feet. When we take the time to call someone whom we have not seen for a while, we become close to them in a way as if we had washed their feet. When we seek to congratulate and celebrate each other, in a way, we wash their feet. When we give our time in service to our community, we wash each other’s feet.

In this Eucharistic celebration, we will share the bread and the cup. Tom will raise the bread and proclaim, “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper.” And we will answer, “Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.” And then we will rise and move slowly and reverently toward the bread and the cup offered to us. In doing so, we are reminded of those familiar times in the gospel when Jesus entered a small village and people brought their sick to him with the hope that his touch would heal them. As we move to receive the bread and cup, each one walks with a desire to be made whole. And the Lord touches each one with his healing touch.

St. Ephraim, who lived from 306 – 373 AD, expressed it beautifully when he prayed, “O Lord, we cannot go to the pool of Siloam for healing to which you sent the blind man. But we do have your bread and the chalice of your precious blood.”

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