

Holy Thursday “How does Jesus Save us”

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How does Jesus save us? Have you ever asked yourself this basic question? How does Jesus save us? We can go far by talking about the incarnation: God became one of us so that we can become one with him for all eternity. We can go far by talking about the divine justice, Jesus though without sin chose out of love to be condemned in our place, redeeming our human nature in the process through his passion, death and resurrection. We can go far by talking about the power of the sacraments, in particular the sacrament of baptism where Jesus’ divine nature is grafted onto our human nature, making us citizens of heaven. All these themes are true. However, if there is one theme that unites all four gospels in how we are saved by Jesus Christ, we recognize that it was not his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. It was not the miracles he performed during his ministry. It wasn’t even the parables or sermons he preached, as helpful as they are in the Spirit life. It certainly wasn’t through Jesus taking power over the world, as the devil tempted him to do.

How does Jesus save us? Unfathomably, Jesus saves us by giving up his power, through profound humility. Like St. Paul says in Philippians, “Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped, rather he emptied himself”. And so, St. Paul tells us in our Second Reading tonight, “The Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”

Stay with this for a moment. Ask yourself: How does Jesus want us to remember him, by his miracles, by his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, by his profound teachings or favorite story? At the last supper, none of these seem that important to him. He rather wants us to remember his service to us, his being broken and poured out for us, sacrificed for us like a paschal lamb that takes away the sins of the world. He wants us to remember him as the one who feeds us with his very self, everything that he is, was or will be. He wants us to save us, to become one with us, and through us carry on this service of salvation to the world. And what does participating in this salvific ministry look like if we would be his disciples?

It looks like washing feet. “So, during supper, fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God, Jesus rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and dry them with the towel around his waist.” The scene is so shocking we had an artist depict this moment on our altar here. The omnipotent God incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ kneels down in the dust before his creation and humbly washes our feet. It is unthinkable. It is a scandal. It doesn’t make any sense until we connect this action with his words, “Do this in remembrance of me”.

My friends, we are tempted to think of achieving spiritual progress with God like we would think of climbing a mountain. And this is a good metaphor, because a relationship with God takes effort. During Holy Week, however, we are shocked to learn that spiritual progress is less about ascending but rather descending, a theme I will explore deeper tomorrow night. Spiritual progress is not about “obtaining” but rather “letting go”. Spiritual progress is measured not in how many books we read, but rather in how we pattern ourselves after the divine master who emptied himself in humble service and commands us to do likewise.

How does Jesus save us? As the Triduum continues tonight, tomorrow night and through Easter Vigil, the invitation is to watch and pray.