

Homily **Holy Thursday - Year C** (18.4.19)

I've always liked history. It was my best subject at school and subsequently I loved church history too when I went to seminary. And I'm pretty sure it was about 590 AD when Pope Gregory... I hope I've got it right. I should've double-checked it, shouldn't I? Pope Gregory first used the title that the Popes subsequently assumed,

"Servant of the Servants of God".

And it was a very powerful and poignant moment when Gregory used it, because over in the East, the new Archbishop of Constantinople was visiting Rome. Constantinople, as a city, was built to be a rival to Rome - it was Constantine's preferred imperial city, because he didn't like Rome, and he wanted to have something that outranked Rome because this is where he resided with his entourage.

And the new Archbishop of Constantinople had just been made, or acclaimed, by the people as patriarch of the East, Father of the East, Papa or Pope of the East. So he came to visit the Pope, the universal Pope, and Gregory greeted him, realizing that Constantinople was all about prestige and power within the Byzantine Empire, and he said,

"I greet you as the servant of the servants of God".

He wanted to make the point that being patriarch was not about prestige.

And, just filling myself with history... I could read history like a novel, history books. I loved this thing as it developed and the papal unfolding of authority and so on. But I noticed in a twist, and I don't know whether you've felt this, that whenever you see it, and it was in medieval times, it became prolifically used, when the pope issued a bull or an edict. Now, a bull is not opposite of a cow, a bull is an edict from Rome, usually condemning someone and usually pulling people into line or putting people right. And it became the tradition whenever the Pope issued an instruction in the world to this day, he says,

"Francis, Servant of the Servants of God".

And in an irony, I think that beautiful title started by Pope Gregory, became a status symbol. Because if you could say,

"I am Servant of the Servants of God", and you are laying the law down, then it meant that you had power. And so, there was something contradictory in that title, even though the origin is profoundly simple. And our Lord himself, of course, said,

"I came not to be served, but to serve".

And when Gregory coined that phrase, he was actually saying the Pope has to be, or the Bishop of Rome, or whatever title you want to use, has to be like Christ, and show something of Christ to the brothers and sisters of the faith.

And of course, our Lord often commented round tables and feasts, the Pharisees' house when he was at the table and they said he eats with prostitutes and sinners, and he used the table as a means of proclamation of his truth. His famous comment was,

"Which is the greater? The one who sits at table, or the one who serves at the table? The one who sits, surely. But here am I, serving you," he said to his disciples.

And here in the Last Supper, he said,

"Yes, you call me Master and Lord, and rightly so. But if I have washed your feet, you too must wash one another's feet".

Which, of course, as you all know, was the task of the servant.

And I don't think we fully grasp this concept of servant. When I started in the civil service, the law still referred to employers and employees as a master-servant relationship. I know, because I used to prosecute people about it, about not properly employing people. And that image is perhaps slimly caught in the TV series that many of you may remember, 'Upstairs Downstairs'. Two different worlds, where those upstairs never really mixed with those downstairs, and vice versa. They were there to wait on the pleasure and the luxury of those upstairs.

And for all of us here, once we get that notion into our mind, then being a servant doesn't look that appealing. And so therefore, being the servant of the servants of God is to remind us that we are there to copy Christ, to lead

us in that example. Of course, every bishop and priest is meant to do that for people to see. I can't say it strikes me immediately that I want to jump into that role, but it's to remind us to copy Christ.

And so it's very fitting, the washing of the feet, that tonight I'm going to wash the servers' feet to be a simple sign of servant of the servants of God, because their ministry, their very important ministry of serving at the table, the altar of the Lord, who is both priest, victim and sacrifice, reminds us that we are called to that service in the Eucharist. Every one of us is a servant of the altar, which is Christ, of the sacrifice, which is Christ, of the true and high priest, which is Christ. And so, even the ordained priest in his ministry serves at the altar, and serves, with assistance, the body and the blood of Christ to the faithful - that they may go out empowered by Christ to serve and not to be served, in the world.