

**O COME, LET US WORSHIP XIX:  
“LORD, I AM NOT WORTHY”**

We have been seeking throughout the days of Lent to see how intertwined is the story of our Lord’s passion with that portrayed in the liturgy of the Holy Eucharist, in that memorial of his passion which he did institute as on this night. As these intertwined stories unfold we see a collage of images: of lambs slain and their blood applied so that an ancient people might be delivered from bondage, of our Lord breaking the bread and pouring out wine as he celebrated the last Passover with his disciples, of the mangled body hanging on the cross, blood and water streaming from his side, of the host at Mass broken over the chalice signifying his death, then broken again and again during the *Agnus Dei* that we all might partake of the bread of heaven, the food and drink of life eternal. All of these images come into focus this night.

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The Epistle of last Sunday from Philippians chapter two told of the humiliation of Christ, of his emptying of himself, a descent from being in the form of God to being made in the likeness of men, thereafter becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. The grand descent of his humiliation reaches its nadir as the death he portrayed with the broken bread and poured out wine becomes an actuality amidst whipping, mockery, sadistic cheers and accusations of blasphemy. The carrying of the heavy cross gives way to his being hung upon it, and enduring its suffering and shame. Such was the great humiliation of our Lord.

And as we approach the most sacred moment of communion with his body and blood, we can approach in no other way than with the deepest humility. The path of humility is well marked throughout the liturgy. It comes to the fore at the confession of sin, for sincere confession causes us to face up to our shame and failure. Then it is with humility that we come and present ourselves, our souls and bodies a living sacrifice, humbly beseeching him that we may be filled with his grace and heavenly benediction. And it is with humility that we plead to the Lamb of God for his mercy and his peace.

Then, just as we draw near to communion, there are two other prayers that voice our proper humility. The first is the Prayer of Humble Access, that wonderfully appropriate prayer penned by Thomas Cranmer: “We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O Merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness.” Massey Shepherd rightly describes this as “a searching and vivid confession of our unworthiness of God’s gifts from the Lord’s Table.” It recalls the humble petition of the Canaanite woman, a lowly Gentile, to receive at least the crumbs from the table. In its latter part the prayer asks that we might truly receive of the Lord—or, in the vivid language of Jesus in the Gospel of John, that we might eat of his flesh and drink of his blood—to the cleansing of both our bodies and our souls.

This is followed very shortly by the other, briefer but perhaps even more moving voicing of our humility: the thrice spoken utterance, “Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof, but speak the word only and my soul shall be healed.” These words are a quotation from yet another Gentile, another foreigner outside the covenant, the Roman centurion who petitioned our Lord for the life of his servant. Like him we say, “Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof,” but, as Dom Guéranger observes,

In our case, it is not for our servant that we beg a cure; it is our own poor soul craving help for herself, and making use of these words, as a last appeal to God. We surely need to be cured; and the nearer we approach the Lord who alone can cure us, the greater should be our confidence in asking. Assuredly nothing can be so certain and manifest, as our unworthiness; but, on the other hand, who is so powerful as the Lord? There is nothing for us, but to appeal to Him, and crave with true humility, . . . Say but one word, and my soul shall be healed.

Before we speak these words, however, the priest has spoken them silently for himself prior to his communion, and the sanctus bell, ringing once for each of his three utterances, alerts us that that time for communion is nigh. There is in the priest’s silent meditation just prior to this one prayer with which, unless you follow all the prayers in the Missal, you might miss. It is well worth my quoting it in full:

O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, whom the Father with the Holy Ghost hath willed by death to make the world to live: by this most holy Body and Blood of thine, set me free from all my sins, and from all evil things: and make me in such wise ever to abide in thy commands that

I may never be separated from thee, who with the same God the Father and the Holy Ghost, livest and reignest one God for ever and ever. Amen.

Fr. Jungmann observes here that “a whole theology is contained in this one prayer.” He continues,

We can also say that in it the grand concepts of the anamnesis [the remembering of Christ’s total work] once more come to life. Grand indeed. Before our mind’s eye appears again the picture of Him whose Body and Blood will soon be our nourishment. At the very start of the prayer our gaze is fixed on Christ whom we in this solemn moment call—as Peter did (Matth. 16:16)—the Son of the living God. Then our look takes in His momentous work of renewing and reviving the world, that work which will be continued in one tiny point in the Sacrament about to be received; our look takes in the well-spring of this work in the grace-laden decree of the heavenly Father and in the obedience unto death of the Son; it takes in the completion of that work in the operation of the Holy Spirit. Grand too is the plea which we now direct to the Lord, confiding in His most holy Body and Blood which He has vouchsafed to us as a sacrifice and which He wills to grant us as a repast; the things which we ask are things of magnitude: deliverance from all sin, the strength to be true to His commandments, and . . . the grace of final perseverance, so that we may never be separated from Him. Here, in bold strokes, the whole pattern of Christianity is presented to view.

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It is the whole pattern of Christianity that is before us on Maundy Thursday. Everything comes into final focus on this night that weds the bread and the cup with the true sacrifice of Christ’s body and blood on the morrow, and thus reveals the depth to which he in love has stooped to draw us to himself. And we, answering his humility and his love, come to kneel before him at the rail of his altar, there to receive at his hand, as truly as did the disciples on that night, the sacrament of our redemption. “This is my body,” he says to us as he said to them. “This is my blood.” And we taking them in our hands and to our lips, can only affirm this grace-filled reality and say, “Amen.” *Ave, verum corpus*, “Hail, true body of Christ.”

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Sermon preached by the Rev’d Fr. Voris G. Brookshire on Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2009, at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL. Copyright © 2009.