

Holy Thursday, 2020
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

We are not where we expected to be.

On Holy Thursday, our church building here at Saint Mary's is usually full of people. And since most Catholics always sit in the same pew, I have an expectation of where you'll be in our pews.

But you are not where I expected you to be. And I am not where I expected to be.

For the past few weeks, most of us have not been where we expected to be. Children expected to be in school – but they've been home. Many of us expected to be at the office – but we're working from home.

A St. Mary's parishioner, expected to be back in Iraq, where he has been doing medical missionary work. But his flights got cancelled. So tonight, he is in New York City, volunteering as a nurse at a temporary hospital. He is not where he expected to be.

If you were listening carefully to John's Gospel, you may heard an interesting detail. In the Gospel, Jesus is not where we expect him to be, either.

On that first Holy Thursday evening, Jesus gathered with the ones whom he loved, to eat the Passover meal. They recalled how God had saved their ancestors in the past.

Then Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, gave it. Likewise the cup. But he said something not found in the traditional Passover text. He said: "This is my body broken for you... this is my blood poured out for you."

This was not what they expected to hear. Perhaps the next day, Friday, they began to comprehend, as they saw his body broken upon the cross. He *said* what they did not expect to *hear*.

Then, he *did* what they were not expecting him to *do*.

In the middle of the meal, Jesus grabbed a basin of water and a towel. And then? Then he *went* where they did not expect to find him. He went to the floor. On his knees. Doing what only a slave would do – washing the filthy feet of imperfect disciples.

They had come to believe that he was the Christ, the messiah. And while they may not fully have understood his divinity, there was one thing they knew for *certain* – you don't expect to find God kneeling before you on the floor!

There he is – The son of God doing what only a servant does. On the floor, doing the dirty work. The thankless job.

That's where God is... and it's not where we expect to find him.

Where do YOU expect to find God?

I often expect to find God in what is beautiful. I expect to find God when I'm staring at the stars, or looking up at the mountains.

I expect to find God in the beauty of a cathedral, in good music, good food, good laughter.

I expect to find God in sacraments and scripture, in the love of family or friends. In faith. I find a *majestic* God there.

But this holy Thursday night – a Holy Thursday unlike most others - Christ calls us to keep looking. Right now, our lives do have some beauty and love and majesty, but we are also dealing with anxiety and headlines and quarantine. And in times like this, we may not be sure where to find Christ.

Maybe the message to us on Holy Thursday of 2020 is this - we must learn to find him *where we least expect him*. And that means, we must find him in all that is humble, and imperfect; in the broken, and brokenhearted....

Are we willing to be humble enough to find a God who is the most humble of all?

Jesus was on the floor – where they did not expect him to be. And by the end of the foot washing, one thing was clear: that's where *we* need to be, too! Jesus said, “What I have done – you must do.”

We *call* ourselves Christians – which means that we are called to be like Jesus. And that means that we will find Christ, every day, if we are willing to be humble, as he was; if we are willing to serve, as he served; if we are willing to do the dirty work, the thankless task...

... if we are willing to do what needs to be done, because we know Christ *wants* it done. Even if that means that we find ourselves where we would rather not be – on the floor, kneeling before

the world, kneeling before imperfect family members, imperfect neighbors, imperfect people. Serving them. Doing what needs to be done.

And why? Because it's what Jesus does, and calls us to do.

On Facebook the other day, I saw a picture of an empty church. And the caption said this: "The church has not been closed. The church has been deployed." That is a brilliant insight. Yes, our buildings are closed. But the church is not a building. You and I are the church. And we have been deployed, we have been sent by God, to BE the church at home, in our neighborhoods, in our nation. To be people who are humble enough to serve our neighbors in the name of Jesus.

There are so many humble tasks to be done right now. There are wounds to be washed and diapers to be changed. There are isolated elderly folks who need a phone call. There are frightened friends who need someone who will listen.

There are people who are turning to the church because they lost their jobs and they don't know how to feed their families. There are face masks that need to be sewn for health care workers. Children who need help learning from home.

There are people trapped in loneliness, parents who are exhausted, people near us who just need some kindness. In other words, there are feet that need to be washed. Whose feet are you called to wash, tonight?

The world expects Christians to be nice. The world expects Catholics to be in church on Holy Thursday.

But *Jesus* has asked us to *leave* our church buildings, and to be radically, wildly generous. Jesus has called us out of our pews, and *on to* our knees, humbly serving the world which, in the end, belongs to him. That's where will find him.

Jesus was not where they expected him to be.

Where does JESUS expect YOU to be?