

“Lord, I Am Not Worthy That You Should Enter Under My Roof”

1. Introduction:

This is a reflection on the dialogue in the new translation of the Roman Missal:

Priest: Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world.

Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.

People: Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof,

but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.

Like many of the texts in the NTRM this is a prayer steeped in Scripture, quoting Jn 1.29-39; Rev 19.9 and Mt 8.5-13 / Lk 7.1-10. The better we know our Scripture the richer the liturgy will seem (and, conversely, we might remember St. Jerome's words: Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.

2. Heart-To-Heart Encounter – Jn 1.29-39:

... This happened at Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, where John was baptising. The next day, he saw Jesus coming towards him and said, 'Look, there is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. It was of him that I said, "Behind me comes one who has passed ahead of me because he existed before me. I did not know him myself, and yet my purpose in coming to baptise with water was so that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John declared, 'I saw the Spirit come down on him like a dove from heaven and rest on him. I did not know him myself, but he who sent me to baptise with water had said to me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and rest is the one who is to baptise with the Holy Spirit." I have seen and I testify that he is the Chosen One of God.'

The next day as John stood there again with two of his disciples, Jesus went past, and John looked towards him and said, 'Look, there is the Lamb of God.' And the two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned round, saw them following and said, 'What do you want?' They answered, 'Rabbi – which means Teacher – 'where do you live?' He replied, 'Come and see'; so they went and saw where he lived, and stayed with him that day. It was about the tenth hour.

This is, above all, a human encounter. Jesus comes to John to be baptised and Jesus' arrival is answered by the Baptist's recognition, driven by the voice of God. The following day he repeats his testimony to two disciples who turn and follow Jesus, setting in motion the assembling of the disciples to live the adventure of the Gospel.

Let's take that imagery and reflect on it in relation to our experience of the Eucharist. Firstly, that note of simple human encounter: our understanding of the sacrament ought to begin from a recognition of the presence here not simply of a 'divine presence' but of a person – indeed the most personal and most intimate presence imaginable, that of the one who is most truly human, Jesus Christ. Pope Benedict surely hit upon the central point when he took Cardinal Newman's motto as the title for his visit to this country: *heart speaks unto heart*. That is the point of every sacrament: that the Lord speaks to our hearts and invites us to share the burden of our hearts with him. It invites and provokes and enables this encounter. We need to safeguard time for this recognition - 'recollection' before and after communion and some form of preparation, even if that can clash at times with the joyful chaos which is community life. Our Eucharistic theology has to be big enough to embrace the tension of these competing values and dimensions, whatever our own particular starting-point or comfort-zone.

3. The Paschal Lamb:

Beyond the “*Behold*,” the act of recognition and the encounter it betokens, there is an evaluation. John the Baptist doesn’t simply say, “*Look, there’s Jesus.*” Jesus is recognised as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Moreover, he, the one who came later, is understood to have a priority, having “existed before” the Baptist. John sees him as filled with the Holy Spirit and as the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit. And all of this shows that he is the Chosen One of God.

Talk of ‘lambs’ might seem to clash with the sometimes fiery rhetoric of John the Baptist’s preaching as reported in the Synoptic Gospels, although there are a couple of passages in apocryphal Jewish books that invoke the figure of a lamb (seemingly there understood as an image of a Messiah-figure, or perhaps as an image of the collective ‘flock of Israel’) who rampages around destroying the wicked. However, the most obvious background to the title ‘Lamb of God’ is of Jesus as the new **Passover Lamb**, an image which was quickly understood in the Church in sacrificial terms (even though the Paschal Lamb wasn’t, technically, a temple sacrifice but a family meal). Description of Jesus as the Paschal Lamb certainly made sense after Good Friday, given the manner and timing of his death, which (according to Jn 19.14, in disagreement with the Synoptic Gospels) took place on Passover eve, he being led out to die at noon, when the slaughter in the temple of the Passover lambs began.

Even before that, however, within the strictly Jewish context, there is a saving significance implicit in the image of the Passover Lamb, remembering how its blood, smeared on the doorposts, kept away the angel of destruction on the night of the Exodus from Egypt. There’s also an implication of substitution, the lamb ‘dying in place of ourselves’, protecting us from death, and, for Christians, Passover imagery inevitably swirled around the Last Supper, as Paul tells the Corinthians: “*For our Passover has been sacrificed, that is, Christ.*” (1 Cor 5.7) And with this imagery went all the implications of the Exodus: freedom from slavery, return from Exile, journey to the Promised Land. The death of the lamb each year indicates all of that, calls it to mind, does memorial (*anamnesis*, to use the Greek word for this ‘making present’ of the saving event). But much more than this, so a Christian interpretation of Passover adds, the death of this particular Lamb on that particular Passover is what makes all of the work of salvation possible.

4. The Suffering Servant:

Yet there is another set of imagery in the Old Testament which “*Behold, the Lamb of God*” might possibly tap into; namely the four Servant Songs embedded in Isa 42-53. This series of portraits of the mysterious “Servant”, who somehow represents the collective, the people of Israel, and sometimes an individual, presumably a king, who acts on behalf of the nation, culminates in the image of the Suffering Servant, the ‘Man of Sorrows’, so familiar from our Good Friday liturgy:

“We had all gone astray like sheep, each taking his own way, and THE LORD brought the acts of rebellion of all of us to bear on him. Ill-treated and afflicted, he never opened his mouth, like a lamb led to the slaughter-house, like a sheep dumb before its shearers. He never opened his mouth. Forcibly after sentence he was taken ... He was given a grave with the wicked, and his tomb is with the rich, although he had done no violence, had spoken no deceit ... After the ordeal he has endured, he will see the light and be content. By his knowledge, the upright man, my servant will justify many by taking their guilt on himself ...”

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Day of Recollection for Eucharistic Ministers – Sept 17, 2011 – Fr. Rob Esdaile

“Behold the Lamb of God,” then, takes us to Calvary which Catholic Tradition has used as a central category for understanding the Eucharist. It states the mystery of innocent brokenness. The words of Jer 11.19 come to mind: *“I for my part was like a trustful lamb being led to the slaughterhouse, not knowing the schemes they were plotting against me, ‘Let us destroy the tree in its strength, let us cut him off from the land of the living so that his name may no longer be remembered!’”* This image doesn’t explain the brokenness. It just states it. That’s why Christ came: to become the brokenness and to redeem it. That’s how he died: broken, a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief. That’s the Mystery we celebrate in the Eucharist.

5. The supper of the Lamb:

If that simple word, “The Lamb” turns out to be rich in significance, the same is also true for the final statement that the priest makes in the dialogue we’re reflecting on: *“Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.”* The point I want to make is a simple one and I can make it simply by comparing it with the phrase in the old translation: *“Happy are those who are called to His Supper.”* The new translations underlines that this isn’t simply a recalling of the past (the Last Supper) or an invitation in the present (“Come and eat”) But a quotation from Rev 19.16-19:

“And I heard what seemed to be the voices of a huge crowd, like the sound of the ocean or the great roar of thunder, answering, ‘Alleluia! The reign of the Lord our God Almighty has begun; let us be glad and joyful and give glory to God, because this is the time for the marriage of the Lamb. His bride is ready, and she has been able to dress herself in dazzling white linen, because her linen is made of the good deeds of the saints.’ The angel said, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb.’” (Rev 19.16-19)

And earlier in the Book we’ve already been told the identity of the great crowd: *“These are the people who have been through the great trial; they have washed their robes white again in the blood of the Lamb. That is why they are standing in front of God’s throne and serving him day and night in his sanctuary.”* (Rev 7.14f)

So the Banquet we are invited to is the final in-gathering of the Elect at the end of the age. The question for us, therefore, is whether we wish to belong to that band of the Elect, to witness with the Martyrs and to let the blood of Christ purify us. So it’s challenge, not comfort that is on offer when the priest says *“Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.”* Supper may be on the table, but the only way to share in it is by taking up our cross and following the Lord wherever he leads. It will take us to uncomfortable places. Now do we wish to come and share in Christ’s meal?

6. Lord, I Am Not Worthy:

Let’s follow through, finally, to the encounter of the Centurion with Christ. I’ll follow Matthew’s version (8.5-13) because it is more direct:

“When he went into Capernaum a centurion came up and pleaded with him. ‘Sir,’ he said, ‘my servant is lying at home paralysed and in great pain.’ Jesus said to him, ‘I will come myself and cure him.’ The centurion replied, ‘Sir, I am not worthy to have you under my roof; just give the word and my servant will be cured. For I am under authority myself and have soldiers under me; and I say to one man, “Go” and he goes; to another, “Come here,” and he comes; to my servant, “Do this,” and he does it.’ When Jesus heard this he was astonished and said to those following him, ‘In truth I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found faith as great as this. And I tell you that many will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob at the feast in the kingdom of Heaven; but the children of the kingdom will

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be thrown out into the darkness outside, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.’ And to the centurion Jesus said, ‘Go back, then; let this be done for you, as your faith demands.’ And the servant was cured at that moment.”

Firstly, note that it’s a Centurion, a Gentile member of the occupying army, someone outwith the household of Jewish faith, a threat to ritual purity. So his presence is problematic as his request is surprising. He has a strict (one might even say naive) military understanding of how the world works, spiritually as well as politically: a man in authority gives the orders and everyone else obeys. So Jesus, as a man with proven spiritual power, only need say the word and the servant will be healed. Indeed, it’s from a sense of his own ritual impurity that the Centurion asks Jesus to heal the servant from a distance: “*Lord, I am not worthy to have you under my roof.*” Jesus says, by way of reply, that the Centurion’s faith is astonishing and he makes this the basis for a prophecy of the gathering in of people from every nation at the heavenly banquet of the Kingdom. As in the case of the healing of the Paralytic (Mk 21-12), it’s the faith of others which brings healing. The Centurion’s Servant’s own belief-system or faithfulness doesn’t come into consideration. Actually that’s the only problem that I have with the new formulation: it substitutes a concern with my own soul for the original prayer for the welfare of the other. It could become very introverted, concerned with ‘me and my God’, instead of engaging with the grief and sickness of others (as does the Centurion so splendidly in the Gospel story). And we might ask whether ‘soul’ adequately renders our sense of self nowadays. My soul shall be healed – not simply as a compartment in my being, the religious, moral bit of me, but the whole of my self, now to be brought wholly into communion with God. The healing of my soul actually consists in the drawing of it into communion, both with my brothers and sisters in the external world and with God in the spiritual realm and, crucially, with the rest of my self, the physical, the sensual, the mortal. Love God and neighbour as you love yourself was the Lord’s command.

7. Conclusion:

We don’t pray that prayer out of a sense of shame or guilt. We are not worthy simply because we are not God: we can’t be ‘worthy of Christ!’ We can’t earn Christ! We can only accept Christ, receive Christ, and accept that he chooses to accept us as his friends and ‘companions’ – literally, the people with whom he shares bread. We pray the ‘*Lord I am not worthy*’ out of a sense of thirst for healing, wholeness, communion. And we know the answer to our request, even before he replies. The Lord comes, enters in, shares our meal, sets up his dwelling, shares his gift. We are left speechless. We can only accept (or refuse) the gift, the presence, the healing that is offered.

I suggest that you might wish to take one of these Scripture passages and pray through it; perhaps imaginatively, thinking yourself into the scene as an onlooker. What do you see? What do you do? How do you react? Notice your reactions. That might be where the Lord wishes to speak to you. Or, if imaginative prayer really isn’t your thing, simply take one the phrases: “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world,” or “Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb,” or, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed,” and make of it a mantra, praying it over and over again. Or thirdly (and at the risk of going into a head-trip) reflect on the idea of Jesus as the Paschal Lamb or the Suffering Servant. But whatever you do, put the emphasis on being, not doing: Be before the Blessed Sacrament, be before the Lord, be before the joy of your ministry – and pray for those to whom you minister.