

Homily from Holy Thursday

April 2, 2026

Our Lord Jesus has left us an example. What is that example?

In E. M. Forster's novel *Howards End* (1910), the author explores families of different classes and their abilities (or inabilities) to live together. One of the main characters, Henry Wilcox, a wealthy industrialist, invites Margaret Schlegel, of a lower social status, to marriage though both families have reservations about this union. In particular, Margaret's sister Helen objects in that she finds Henry proud and disdainful of the poor. At the end of the novel, the proud Henry is humbled when his son Charles kills a man and is taken into custody. The son's future is in the balance, and the family's reputation in doubt as an inquest regarding the death is ready to start. Though the events have strained his marriage, he still wants to confess to Margaret his fears for the outcome for his son: "The verdict of the inquest will be manslaughter. ... Charles may go to prison. I dare not tell him. I don't know what to do — what to do. I'm broken — I'm ended."

The narrative ends, "The law sentenced [Charles] to three years' imprisonment. Then Henry's fortress gave way. He could bear no one but his wife; he shambled up to Margaret afterwards and asked her to do what she could with him. She did what seemed easiest. She took him home.

Henry's fortress, in the novel, gives way in a moment of crisis for him, with his life, his reputation and that of his son's, in the balance. He placed himself into his wife's hands, fearing she would abandon him in his shame. Into this, his wife offers redemption, not abandoning him, but offering mercy to the humiliated Henry. Only when he could admit his need can he receive mercy.

In the Gospel today, for the celebration of Holy Thursday, the humble Jesus gives his apostles an example by washing their feet. Peter, the rock, has indeed built a fortress, both around himself and Jesus, when he says, "You will never wash my feet."

So, *what's up with this?* The implication is that it is not fitting for Jesus to humble himself to the point of washing the dirty feet of his disciples, a job normally left for a slave. Jesus has never claimed the privileged isolation of a divine fortress, however, but instead is the man of humility, so that the washing of the feet is the most natural thing for his nature. But Peter is the one whose fortress must give way. For, until he recognizes not only his need to be washed, but also that only Jesus can do it, he will never know life. As Jesus says, "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me."

Until we can see our need to be washed, we too will have no inheritance with God — no eternal inheritance. Certainly, the lesson of the foot-washing of Jesus, as he himself makes clear, is that of an example. We indeed have to do this for others. But there is more to the example than that. Until we recognize we need washing as well our hearts sullied with anger, fear, unforgiveness. Our fortress will remain strong while we can't live

at all, and we will not be able to see the need in ourselves or be willing to offer a washing to others through acts of mercy. So, may the fortresses of our pride, following the example of our great savior Jesus, give way to the merciful washing of the Holy Spirit, that we might then be ready to wash others with reviving acts of mercy.