

Maundy Thursday 2017

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'Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end' (John 13.1).

+In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

John opens his narrative of these last hours of Jesus's life by telling us that these three days of turmoil and defeat, of the despair of utter weakness, are in reality a demonstration of the remarkable power of love.

Jesus is hosting a dinner with his friends. The host in Christ's day, as typical in ours, provided the food and drink and welcomed others to be served at his or her table. One of the main and necessary ways hosting was different than in our time and place was that the host made sure that the guests had their feet washed before the meal.

After the washing of the guests' feet, the host, in the sort of Jewish ritual meal that Jesus is having with his

friends, would take the bread and give thanks for it, break it, and distribute it. This is all, on the face of it, quite mundane and ordinary. Nothing unusual, nothing surprising.

But Jesus is not only a host welcoming his guests, though he is that. This is not the same sort of mundane meal Christ would have had with his disciples many times over. Jesus is doing something new here. Something new is happening, and it begins with the simple act of washing feet.

And Jesus's command to do to others what he has done for them is an invitation into a new world. Jesus is recreating human society by showing us what love means, and to follow him in this is to take part in the new creation.

The new life granted through the mystery of Christ's resurrection is on display in Christ's loving actions here already on Maundy Thursday, on the road to Christ's death.

Our reading in 1 Corinthians reminds us that Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine of the Eucharist is a 'new covenant'.

The 'old' covenant saw the formation of God's people, it gave them their identity. Jesus here is establishing a new covenant—creating a people in which he will abide to bring about the renewal of all things.

And Jesus shows us something of what this reality looks like when he bends down to wash his disciples' feet.

This is, again, an everyday mundane occurrence, but would have been carried out, of course, not by the host but by the host's slave. In washing the disciples' feet himself, Jesus is both the host showing hospitality to his guests, and the servant tending to them: he is master, and he is slave.

His hour has come, he is departing this world and returning to his Father, and he is showing us the path to follow him into a new human society, a new family under a new covenant.

This new society begins with a unity that does not observe status: no master or slave, but only brother and sister. At the institution of the Eucharist on

Maundy Thursday the Lord is the servant and the servant is the Lord.

The same understanding of this new human society is seen in First Corinthians. Paul scolds the Corinthian church for having divisions among them, among those of status and those without it. 'Do you despise the Church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?', he asks.

The solution, he continues, is this: 'The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is broken for you". . . In the same way also the chalice . . . saying, "This is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me"'.

In the institution of the Eucharist Jesus inaugurates a new humanity, but that newness, that new covenantal identity, is a covenant founded upon his blood. The community of the Church, the salvation of the nations, is formed in Eucharistic celebration, we are made one, made whole, as the body of Christ, but first, through the breaking of that Body: 'For as often as you eat this

bread and drink the chalice, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor 11.26).

Our covenantal union, our identity, is always one of crucifixion.

You see, it's all fine and good to speak on Maundy Thursday about the *formation* or inauguration of the Christian community, our community: equality in foot washing, unity in Eucharist. But there is a dark side to this night. We are also celebrating, for lack of a better word, our dispersal, our breaking apart, our complete dissolution.

This is the night in which it all came to an end. No hope in sight, no plan, no victory, only doom and despair. And everyone flees. Dispersion.

But, Jesus did something very strange at the Last Supper. He proclaimed that the bread was his body, and he broke it; that the wine was his blood, poured out; he looked his death in the eye—and he gave *thanks* for it. And then, he gave it to his friends to partake in.

'I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you'. We do not only have here an example of humility to follow as Christ washes the disciples' feet. We are learning to feed and learning to eat, we are learning to serve and learning to be served, we are learning to be both hospitable host and welcomed guest, and yes, we are learning to live and learning to *die*.

'If I do not wash you you have no part in me', Jesus told Peter. We are washed that we may take part in the life of Christ—that life that loves through betrayal, that forgives through misery, that lives through death.

Tonight we sit in the loneliness of the garden, tomorrow in the brokenness of the cross, Saturday in the despair of the grave, but all along in hope.

Jesus offers us his body and blood, his very life, for the life of the world, and whatever his life touches comes alive—even death. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not an afterthought, or a solution to a problem. It is not as if Jesus dies and then God thinks, 'Oh no, I guess I'd better take care of that now'. When the perfect love, the infinite divine life, touches death, even death itself has no choice but to come alive.

So tonight, dispersion, dissolution. And these three days, yes, we remain in the darkness. But in these three days, Christ meets us there, and when he does, our darkness meets the light of life.

So wherever we are and whatever our sorrows and however long we have to sit in that God-forsaken black-hole of a garden devoid of light, with seemingly no hope in sight, we're OK. We're OK.

Because Christ, our hope, inhabits that place. Because Christ, our hope, abides there too. Because Christ, our hope, loves *to the end*.