

Sermon for Maundy Thursday 2023

Exod 12:1-8, 11-14; Ps 116:12-13, 15-18;

1 Cor 11:23-26; John 13:1-15

A week ago, two ministers of religion told me that they hate being unexpectedly asked to say grace before a meal. This is not, of course, like the professional singer asked by a cab driver to “just sing something”, in which case the singer’s mind can go blank, since they are not in the right context. A clergyperson ought to be able to recall some words of blessing, since blessing things is simply what priests do, and you could say that sharing a meal is at the very heart of what it means to be a human in community.

But practice is always valuable, and it’s in such situations that the value of repetition comes to the fore. In my case, I have the wonderful example of my grandfather’s near-incomprehensible grace in Southern Illinois dialect, which I translate here as *Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest; bless this food and nourish our souls.*

I don’t know where he learned it, but he has never once, to my knowledge, failed to give thanks before a meal.

On this night in which we recall the institution of the greatest meal in history, part of what we remember is Jesus doing the same. “...in the same night that he was betrayed”, the eucharistic prayer says, he “took bread; and when he had given thanks to thee, he broke it and gave it to his disciples”.

My grandfather’s Christian tradition is not Eucharistic, but for the Judaism of Jesus’ time, thanksgiving was an essential precursor to eating. It is so much part of a meal that we consider the entire sacrifice of the mass to be an act of praise and thanksgiving.

The various eucharistic liturgies authorised by the Church of England quietly emphasise that the “gifts” that we bring to the altar are in fact God’s gifts to us, not the other way round. “Blessed are you, Lord God of

all creation; through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made.” *Through your goodness.* God’s own gifts for God’s people, brought to God’s own altar, and then gifted back to us, consecrated through the actions of the community, yes, but using the words “by the power of your holy spirit”, and also the words of institution, our Lord’s own over those same gifts at that meal.

They belonged to God in the first place, and he is giving them back to us as himself.

It might seem strange that the gospel reading, tonight of all nights, is not about the Last Supper. We do hear about it in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, and about its precursor, the first Passover, in Exodus. We even have, in Psalm 116, a little verse that seems to prefigure what we are doing in the mass: “I will offer to thee a sacrifice of thanksgiving”. But the most important reading of the night focuses instead on what happened *before* the meal: the foot-washing.

We are taught, in this reading, about service and example. “Do you know what I have done to you?” asks Jesus, after he has horrified the disciples by overturning status protocol and washing *their* feet. What he has done to them is to set them an example of service and love.

This example is not optional. We are not at an ethical buffet. The only possible response to Christ is the imitation of him, far more important than following any set of rules or trying to work out what Jesus’ ethics were so that we can make them into a system. To go slightly nautical for a moment, Jesus is our polestar, and we are sailing in waters that are not so safe as to allow for aimless drifting. We must follow his pattern of Christian life. The gospels show us how he did this, making each element holy by doing it first himself.

In baptism, Jesus goes into the waters not because he needs cleansing or forgiveness, but because he is sanctifying them forever for *our* use. In the washing of the disciples’ feet, he does the same, showing us how service, and love of others, is indispensable.

And in the Eucharist he takes simple elements and makes *them* essential, and life-giving. They are essential because, in this meal, they become God, not just a symbol or a pattern, but God's own body and blood, offered to us in the greatest and most beautiful mystery. We bring them before our Father and lay them on the altar in their almost embarrassing simplicity, praising and thanking him because in return we are sustained physically and spiritually, and brought into the most intimate contact with our Lord. In the Eucharistic meal, we are with him as fully as we can ever be before we see him face to face at the great banquet at the end of time.

"Give us this day our daily bread," Jesus teaches us to pray, and we say those words in the Lord's Prayer moments before his body is broken on the altar at the Agnus Dei. *This* is our daily bread, whether the mass is celebrated in a church awash with music and light, or the sacrament is put carefully in the hands of the housebound with only the tick of the clock for an anthem. When we are lost, Christ is waiting in the Eucharist to welcome us home.

"Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest" is reversed: we, receiving the sacrament, or "host", are guests of that greatest host himself, receiving him at his own table. So we offer him our thanks that he has given himself to us in love, and that he draws us perpetually back to himself in this holy meal.

Amen.