

Maundy Thursday, 2024: Exodus 12.1-4, 11-14; 1 Corinthians 11.23-26; John 1-17, 31b-35

Maundy Thursday, this important commemoration in Holy Week, remains one of the most neglected of the Christian year's festivals coming as it does just a few days after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with its warm welcome and his impending death on a cross tomorrow. When the time comes it shall be one of my deep regrets that I wasn't better able to commend this festival of the Church to the Christ Church believer together with the inability to commend the keeping of the Christian year as a spiritual and enriching discipline: in my mind a must. In the whole of Lent there is one day when the singing of the Gloria is mandated and that day is today within the parameters of this unique service. It is a marker. It is saying, Christian take note. There are gifts here from the Lord that will soon be giving shape to those who believe and the communities they will help bring into being through God's grace working within them post resurrection.

There are three things in addition to the singing of the Gloria I wish to highlight briefly for our benefit so that together we might better appreciate this service during Holy Week 2024 and hopefully in the years to come, and more importantly see just how Jesus in the last twenty-four hours of his earthly life is giving direction to what God's Church on earth is to look like, if it is faithful to his Word.

Tomorrow at the ecumenical service three of the short meditations are under the heading of Gifts from the Cross. Leaning on that heart-warming title Gifts from the Cross we can also speak of Gifts from the Upper Room. Both in the Upper and on the Cross God in Jesus keeps on giving. He is the gift that keeps on giving. Two of these three things are about the shaping of the life of the Church by the shaping of its members, who can only be truly Christian through participating in and giving of themselves as members of a community an expression of the Body of Christ.

Today we celebrate the giving, the institution of the Eucharist, the Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Mass. Each title favoured by different families within the Church points to what the Last Supper will become for the Church. It is a meal instituted by Jesus leaning heavily on the precedent of the Passover meal with its call to remember. It is a supper by which we proclaim Christ's death, his atoning sacrifice until he comes again. It is a means by which the Church is fed by the Lord, just as he fed the crowds on two separate occasions and they had their fill, but from now on he feeds us with the spiritual food of his body and blood. In the hymn Bread of Heaven we sing, 'For thy flesh is meat indeed. Ever may my soul be fed. With this true and living bread; Day by day with strength supplied, Through the life of Him who died.' Finally, it is a meal through which we give thanks for all that God in Jesus has accomplished for us through the cross and resurrection as the Incarnate One. The institution of Holy Communion is accompanied by a commandment, 'Do this in remembrance of me.'

This leads us to the second commandment of today with its accompanying sign the washing of the disciples' feet. Jesus says basically, You are to do what I have done. You are to wash one another's feet. This is the kind of regard, deference, you my disciples are to have for one another. He actually says, 'So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.' (John 13:14) Jesus is leaving them a gift, which does not come easily and is

reinforced with a sign the washing of the disciples' feet. This gift can only be appreciated and the benefits that accompany it, if one gives oneself to it. Jesus goes on to point out through the washing of their feet he has set them an **example**. The basin, the towel and the water poured out over the feet of the disciples will be more fully illuminated by God's self-giving from the cross. This section of today's gospel reading that began with a sign the washing of the disciples' feet is rounded off by Jesus by sealing it with yet another commandment. He calls it a new commandment. This Lord and Teacher has divine authority. He explicitly states it is new. It will soon come to define Paul's definition of love. Jesus commands 'You are to love one another, as I have loved you.' Its realisation is based on mutually deferring in Christian love and truth to one another by mutually having respect/regard for one another. Anyone with a deeper acquaintance of the Christian life knows just how difficult it is for Christians to approximate to this standard of 'You are to ...' 'You are to love one another as I have loved you.' And it is by this mutual love that the world will know that we are his disciples. Yet wolves, as Jesus warns, will and do cause havoc.

This brings me to the third thing that I wish to highlight. It is found just beyond the parameters of this service in the keeping of the one hour watch in the garden. As you may remember from Sunday's reading of the Passion according to Mark, Jesus goes away to pray on his own. There we see him struggling with the way he must go, if he truly desires to be faithful to God the Father's will. It is a big ask. Each time he returns from praying he finds the disciples sleeping. Even though he has asked them to keep awake and watch knowing that trouble is at hand. This picture is a picture of the Church today and in every age. Her inability to keep watch. Her inability to guard the deposit of faith, as she is blown this way and that. She, the Church is possibly a little tired after 20 centuries?

Finally, and truly finally at the end of the service the altar will be stripped and the ornaments of the sanctuary will be removed. This liturgical enactment anticipates the stripping of Jesus by the Roman soldiers moments prior to his crucifixion. but before he was stripped naked, he was also humiliated by Jewish persons attached to the high priest's court, who blindfold him, struck him and spat on him as Mark records. (Mark 14.65) The cards are stacked against him both religiously and politically and in their collusion. When we enter the church tomorrow on Good Friday and we see the barrenness of the sanctuary we cannot be reminded that Jesus who gave so much that we might have life in fulness was not spared the humiliation of being made a spectacle of in his nakedness.

We have covered a lot of ground. The Gloria asks us to take note. We have spoken about the institution of the Eucharist with its multi-faceted depth, the new love commandment in His name with the accompanying sign, the church's failure and our failure to keep awake, often busied by looking to human things rather than heavenly things. Tonight, we look to heavenly things. Tonight is a gift. We remember. Amen.