

A Sermon for Maundy Thursday

Tonight we begin our observance of the Triduum, the Three Great Days. The service that begins tonight does not end until the dismissal from the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday. We are on an emotional and spiritual journey that will challenge us, inspire us, and ultimately comfort and reassure us. But we must be patient and allow it to take its course. We must not rush to behold the empty tomb and encounter the risen Christ too soon; we must take things as they come.

Tonight we commemorate the Institution of the Eucharist. Jesus used the Passover to create a new symbol of humanity's covenant with God. As was recounted in the passage from the First Letter to the Corinthians, Jesus took bread and wine, gave thanks for them as he called them his body and his blood, and shared them with his disciples, saying "do this in remembrance of me". The Passover lamb was offered to atone for sin, and Jesus declares that he is the Lamb, and that he will atone for the sins of the world. He does this by choice, and as a symbol of his love, and God's love, for all humanity.

In addition to the Institution of the Eucharist, we recall something else in tonight's liturgy. The very name we give today, Maundy Thursday, is linked to it. 'Maundy' comes from the Latin term 'Mandatum', commandment, and refers to the Mandatum Novum, the New Commandment that Jesus gave to his disciples. Love one another.

He even explains that our obedience to this commandment, and the love we show others, will signify our faith. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another". Love is our calling-card as Christians, and we are called to show that calling-card often, and openly.

Yet before he spoke those words, Jesus used his actions to show what he meant, and did so clearly. Jesus was a good teacher – he understood the value of a good practical demonstration as a way to make your point. He takes off his outer robe, puts on the towel, pours the water and begins to wash his disciples' feet.

This is an interesting act because it has many levels to it. The disciples needed some help to understand what he was doing and why, but Jesus does indeed explain.

The first thing about the washing of the disciples' feet is that it is a practical act of care and hygiene. In the time of Jesus, walking was the main method of transport and roads were dusty. Walking meant that your feet became dirty. When you arrived at your destination, it was common to have your feet washed by a servant as something which was both relaxing, and kept the house clean. Jesus, in this moment, is caring for his disciples in a very practical manner.

But far greater than the practicality of the foot-washing is the symbolism of the action. This was the duty of a servant, not a teacher, nor a host. Jesus was lowering himself to perform a menial task. He does this to teach an important lesson about humility, service and leadership. From this we draw the Christian vision of leadership which sees the leader as a servant, as one who is no greater than anyone else, but whose skills and talents are used in the service of others. Jesus explains all this to his disciples, and says “for I have set you an example, that you should also do as I have done for you”.

May we be people who follow that commandment, and are willing to keep it in our hearts and minds, tonight and always.

After our celebration of the Eucharist, we move to the bleakest part of our liturgy. We recall Jesus’ betrayal and arrest through the stripping of the altar. It is emptied; the precious and beautiful things in the sanctuary are taken away, and it is left looking strangely stark. This reminds us of the sense of loss and distress that the disciples felt as Jesus was taken away and their inability to stay with him throughout his final hours. It recalls the sense of injustice at his condemnation by Pilate, who had the power to release him.

But there is hope. Always. In the darkened Church there is a bastion of beauty and light; the Altar of Repose. Lit by candles, it is a place where we may find some joy and comfort tonight once the Church is stripped and darkened. I encourage you to spend some time there in prayer before you leave. Enjoy the stillness and the silence. Remember Jesus’ request that the disciples remain and watch and pray with him, for a little while. Then make your way into the night.

Maundy Thursday is a wonderful day. It is also a challenging day. May tonight’s remembrance of the Institution of the Eucharist, the washing of feet and the giving of the New Commandment inspire us in our daily living, so we may respond to the world with love, as Christ taught us to do.

May our recollection of his betrayal and arrest, and the great price he paid for us, remind us of the depth of God’s love for us, and inspire us to respond with gratitude, humility, and love. I pray that God is with us through these precious days, and is known to us through the great liturgy of the Triduum.

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