

Maundy Thursday 2017

Here we are gathering ‘on the night he was betrayed.’ It is one of those nights that defies homiletics. This evening’s gospel is, after all John’s, homily on the Last Supper. The washing of the disciple’s feet is John’s commentary; so I wonder is it almost pretentious of me to stand here and try and do justice to this text? I feel its weight and the weight of all those before me who have tried to break it open. It is difficult to appreciate the sheer magnitude of Jesus actions; the host becomes the slave. Our egalitarian society has no parallels. It is not surprising is it that dear, dear Peter could not get his head around what was going on. You can almost imagine him looking at one of his fellow disciples and saying ‘and I thought I’d seen it all.’ What would have been for them this great feast, the greatest, with all its familiar ritual was changed completely, forever. Shock, dismay, was this for Judas the ‘straw that broke the camel’s back,’ and he left to seek out the authorities to report this ‘parody’ of the Passover? We do tend to think of the Last Supper in rather sentimental terms, but we can tend to underestimate the atmosphere, the tension, the fear, the apprehension in that room that evening. Even the Church in its early days struggled to come to terms with this story. For a while Foot washing became a sacrament because it pointed to something beyond itself, it had all the qualities of the sacramental.

What Jesus was doing *exactly* at the Last Supper has been the subject of great debate throughout the centuries. Was it a Passover meal, or some other kind of fellowship meal with his disciples? We shall never know for sure, but quite clearly Jesus was following the pattern of the Passover meal, but giving it a completely new meaning. The Jewish people then and today in commemorating Passover had two important principles and Jesus adopted them and gave them a new and profound meaning. The first is the notion of *Zikkaron* this is the idea of remembrance. At the Passover the Jewish people remember and indeed make real again the Exodus story, the story of their liberation from slavery at the hands of the Egyptians. The second principle is that of *Haggadah*, this is interpretation. The elder at the Passover feast interprets what it all means the various foods, the Passover lamb, the bitter herbs etc.

Jesus does the same, in *Zikkaron* he calls on us at the Eucharist to remember, reenact, *we* his disciples are there, in the room, *us* his followers, we are there. We are here. This is ‘Kairos’ God’s time. Timeless, the past becomes for us the present and together we are flung into the future, reminded of the heavenly banquet which the Eucharist prefigures. And Jesus interprets, *Haggadah* this bread, this is my Body, given for you.

Whatever happened we know that this became ‘the night he was betrayed,’ that most notorious of nights. And so as we gather here tonight, at the Last Supper, as Christ’s disciples, we cannot help but be aware of our role in the events of this night, our own betrayals. Even as we commit ourselves anew to ministry, symbolized by the sacred oils, symbolized by the washing of feet, the offering of the Eucharist. Even as we do that, we are reminded of our betrayals, the times we have failed. And yet on this most notorious of nights he turned our betrayal into the means by which we are saved.

We are of course not alone in this, in this betrayal, it is a scandal that while we are celebrating here our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters are doing almost exactly the same thing a mere few hundred yards away. We are all in this together. On this night, the very night that Jesus prayed that we might all be one, so that the world might believe. But on this very night, they slept while Jesus prayed, James and John argued about who would be the greatest, Peter denied ever knowing him, and Judas identified him in the garden with a kiss. They were hardly one, yet on this night he took bread, people like us, disciples like us, a church like ours and gave thanks.

And therefore we too should ‘at all times and places’ give thanks. ‘In thanksgiving’ should be the mark of our ministries, the ministries inaugurated by Christ, on the night he was betrayed. The priestly ministry of the altar, the priesthood of us all epitomised in the sacrificial act of washing feet, the ministry of prayer as we wait and watch.

On the night he was betrayed he took bread and gave thanks.