

Legacy Of Our Lord
John 13:1-17, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Maundy Thursday, April 1, 2010

I.

Tonight we stand on the eve of the sorrow of Good Friday. And tomorrow we will hear Jesus' last words from the cross. "It is finished." We witnessed a dramatic presentation of that in our Amazing Praisers play last week.

But before we hear of the last moment of Jesus' life, we hear tonight what he said on the last full day of his life.

The name of this service gives us a clue as to its nature. The word "maundy" comes from the Latin word "mandatum," whose English rendering is "mandate." Maundy thus signifies an instruction, or a command.

And two things Jesus did at the Last Supper so long ago were of that nature. First, he washed the disciples' feet to instruct them, and to instruct us, in the ways of servanthood and humility. He demonstrated that his love knows no limits.

Second, he explained that the bread and wine of his final meal were his body and blood given for us. And he commanded his disciples, and all people for all time, to continually celebrate his sacrifice and its meaning in remembrance of him.

We will follow both of Jesus' instructions this evening. But first, I would like to speak briefly about our foot washing service, and then reflect in greater detail upon our sacrament of Holy Eucharist.

II.

Let's begin with some background on the practice of foot washing. In first century Palestine people wore sandals and walked on dusty roads. When they arrived at their destinations it was traditional, and probably necessary, for them to wash their feet.

Socially, however, it was regarded as a menial task that never would be done by the host of a gathering, or the owner of the house, or anyone in a position of authority. People either washed their own feet, or it was done by servants.

But yet, Jesus, the Son of God, washed the disciples feet to show them the meaning of humility. And it demonstrated what he said earlier in his ministry about how the first shall be last and the last shall be first, and those who wish to be great must first be servants.

As a result, this story is not really about dirty feet. The disciples probably had washed their feet earlier when they came in the room. This is one of those classic cases where actions speak louder than words.

And Jesus' actions turned tradition upside down. He showed that the world's values were not always God's values. He made it clear that the pride and vanity of worldly things eventually must give way to the humility and selflessness of godly things.

In that simple act of washing the disciples' feet Jesus exemplified two principles of Christian life. First, just as he served his friends, we also are called to serve others. Second, as is evident from his dialogue with Peter, it is important that we willingly receive those same offerings of kindness when others extend them to us.

After I finish this homily we will have a foot washing service right here where some people will act as representatives of the congregation. I understand that others might be observers, and that's fine. Anyone, however, who wants to come forward is welcome to do so.

III.

Then, shortly after we minister to our feet, we will minister to our hearts and our souls. We will celebrate the Eucharist in obedience to our Lord's command, and in thanksgiving for his sacrifice.

And this takes us to the reading we heard from First Corinthians. The words were familiar weren't they? This is my body, which is given for you. This is my blood of the new covenant. Do this in remembrance of me. We say them in our Eucharistic prayers at least three times a week here at St. Thomas, and frequently more often than that.

But even though we heard Jesus' words, we might wonder why he said them? Why did he use bread and wine to make his point? What was behind all this?

We probably know that night was the Jewish Passover. Jesus and the disciples, as well Jews everywhere else in Palestine and the ancient world, were celebrating God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from captivity in Egypt. They had done so with a Passover meal on that special night for over one thousand years.

And we also know that after delivering his people, God made a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai that if they were obedient to him they would be blessed, and would be the light to bring the rest of the world to faith in God. Today this is called the Old Covenant.

History shows, however, that the Hebrew people did not honor the covenant. Those events are another sermon. But God tried again. He was faithful to humanity. Jesus Christ came to restore our relationship with God in a New Covenant.

And that New Covenant is God's promise to all people for all time that if we are penitent and accept Jesus as our Savior and believe that he died for us, then we will be forgiven our sins and have eternal life in God's presence.

So the Hebrew Passover celebration of the Old Covenant made room for the New Covenant of our faith. That does not mean the New Covenant supersedes the old. It does not. And it is not a new and improved version of the old. The Hebrew people still are among God's chosen.

But it does mean that the new fulfills the old, and the biblical nation of Israel that was created when Moses and Joshua led the people into the promised land now is called to manifest itself through the church Jesus Christ established and left behind as the light to bring all people to faith.

IV.

So, how does our Lord ask us to understand what happened so long ago on that Passover night in the upper room? The question has two parts. First, how do we treat the bread and the wine? Second, what does the Eucharist mean in our lives?

As we begin with the bread and wine, it's important to understand that Jesus said this *is* my body, this *is* my blood. He did not say that it symbolized his body or blood. He was not using figures of speech. His intent was much more than mere imagery.

On the other hand he also did not mean that the bread and wine were in fact his body and blood. Jesus obviously was still alive. His blood had not yet been shed when he said it. His body still was untouched. And so we might reasonably conclude that he was not speaking in an absolute literal sense either.

Different denominations understand Christ's meaning at this Last Supper in different ways. In the Episcopal Church, and in the Anglican Church worldwide, we generally accept the doctrine of the "Real Presence."

This means that Jesus Christ really and actually is present in the bread and wine as it is given in communion. But we do not go so far as to say that the bread and wine actually have been transformed into Christ's body and blood in some way. We believe they begin the Eucharistic celebration as bread and wine, and remain as bread and wine.

However, as the bread and wine are consecrated something happens. Jesus Christ miraculously is present at the Holy Table because of what began at the Last Supper and continued for the next three days. It's a spiritual thing and not just symbolic. He truly is among us, although we don't know how to explain it in human words. It is a mystery and will remain so this side of eternity.

The second question, the meaning of the Eucharist in our lives, is not so mysterious. We know that at baptism we are freed from the guilt of original sin and cleansed. And we also know that notwithstanding the grace of baptism we continue to disregard God's will for us. But that does not mean that something went wrong at our baptisms, or that something did not take.

Rather it confirms that we are not perfect, and we still do things that separate us from God. That's one of the reasons why we have the Eucharist. We confess our sins during the service and are cleansed. It is not just a ritual or meaningless gestures.

Christ's body and blood were given for us. Think about that. Given for us, to offer forgiveness for our inevitable sins. And if we sincerely seek forgiveness then it is granted. Regular participation in the Eucharist restores us, and prepares us again to walk in the light of Christ.

V.

So, this night overflows with meaning. We sense the spiritual significance of Jesus' washing the disciples feet. And we share the spiritual reality of his presence in the Eucharist.

As we continue through this Holy Week, we will experience the sorrow, sadness, and introspection of Good Friday. And then comes the joy and celebration of Easter. But tonight, Maundy Thursday, is a night of humility, service, and sharing in our Lord's presence. It truly leads to the meaning of Good Friday and the hope of Easter. *Amen.*