

Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; John 13:1-17, 31b-35; I Corinthians 11:23-26

Maundy Thursday is the Holy Week observance of the last day of Jesus' life before his trial and execution. It is traditionally a time for the church to celebrate the sacrament of the Eucharist or Holy Communion. The name "Maundy" is derived from the Latin "*mandatum novum*", the opening words of the Latin ceremony of the washing of the feet (John 13:34), which traditionally takes place in this day's worship.

John 13:1-17, 31b-35 describes a sacramental act that plays as key a role in the Gospel of John as the sacrament of holy communion plays in the Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). That is the "sacrament" of the washing of the disciples' feet (John 13:1-20).¹ That act is as follows:

"Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him." (John 13:3-5)

Consistently in the records of Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 (a preamble to the institution of the Lord's Supper) in the Synoptic Gospels, each writer tells us that Jesus "took" the bread, "blessed" it, "broke" it, and then "gave" it to the disciples for distribution to the crowd (Mt. 14:19, Mk. 6:41, Lk. 9:16). Only the Gospel of John, in its telling of the feeding of the 5,000 omits that liturgical order (John 6:1-15, the reason for the exclusion being made clear below). This four-step pattern of "take", "bless", "break", "give" is used to initiate the Eucharistic pattern that symbolized the sacrificial death of Jesus and of Christian martyrs who were taken or chosen by God for sacrifice, were "blessed" or dedicated for that service, were "broken" in execution and "given" for the sake of the world.

Intriguingly, John follows the same pattern in his presentation of the intentional act of the washing of the disciples' feet. It is particularly evident in the Greek in which it was originally written. In John 13:3-5, the writer declares that Jesus "got up" or "rose" (the Greek word *egeiretai*), "removed" or "laid down" his outer garment (*tithesin*), "took" a towel (*labano*), and "wrapped" or "girded" his waist (*diezosen*) in order to wash his disciples' feet. Jesus "rose", "laid down", "took" and "wrapped" himself – four liturgical acts.

The key to understanding the significance of the author's choice of these four words to describe what it is that Jesus was doing lies in examining how these words are used throughout the Gospel of John. The Greek word "egeisetai" is otherwise used exclusively in the Gospel of John to refer to Jesus' resurrection from the dead (2:19, 20, 22; 5:8, 21; 12:7, 9, 17). The word "tithesia" is otherwise used in John for Jesus' "laying down" of his life (10:11, 15, 17, 18; 11:34). The word "lambano" is used 45 times in John as "receive" or "accept" – that is, those who receive and accept Christ or reject him. Finally, the word "diezosen" is used otherwise only twice in John –

¹ The Gospel of John does not record the institution of the Lord's Supper, as do the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Rather, John substitutes another act that has a sacramental nature to it, the washing of the disciples' feet.

in 21:7 and 18 – for Peter’s actions in preparing himself for his meeting with Christ or for his own martyrdom.

In other words, just as the Synoptics took the apparently ordinary actions of Jesus in the feeding of the 5,000 to symbolize eucharistically Christ’s sacrificial death for us and our sacrifice of ourselves to him, so John is taking the ordinary actions of “rising”, “laying down”, “taking” and “girding” in preparation for the washing of the disciples’ feet to symbolize both what Christ has done for us in his death and resurrection, and what has to be the depth of our commitment to each other as a part of Christ’s body – the Church!

“Then Jesus poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him” (13:5).

Jesus begins the sacramental act of washing the disciples’ feet. Peter, disturbed at this intimacy and call of Jesus through this act, refuses to participate. But Jesus points out to Peter that refusal of both this intimacy and call excludes the refusing one to ever “share with me”. Peter, hearing this, crumbles and, in his usual strong and effusive style, declares, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head” (13:9)!

Concluding the foot washing, Jesus gives the disciples an explanation for his actions. “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them” (13:12-17).

This passage is most often interpreted as being a call to the church to humble service. It is seen as a lesson on humility. But neither the context nor the symbolism of the words nor the word order will allow that interpretation.

The context of his passage – from John, chapters 11 through 17 – is all about Jesus’ preparation of himself and of his beloved community for death at the hands of the systems – death as a political insurrectionist. It takes a stretch of imagination to interpret a passage that is so pivotal to the context’s message to be about anything other than death.

Likewise, the careful choice of words in 13:3-4 introducing this passage directs us toward a “death” interpretation. Just as the authors of the three synoptic gospels so carefully chose the words of institution of the Eucharist in their stories about the feeding of the 5,000, so John has carefully chosen the words of institution of this central sacramental act in his gospel. And those words – “rose”, “laid down”, “took”, “wrapped” – all deal with the words John uses to refer to Jesus’ own death and resurrection.

Third, the word order in 13:12-17 doesn’t allow an interpretation of this act as being that of humble service. Jesus states that he, as the disciples’ Lord and teacher, has set them an example. What he has done, they should do. Then Jesus says, “Servants are not greater than their master” (vs. 16). If Jesus had been teaching them about humble service, and given the sentence structure

of the previous sentences, he should have said, “Masters are not greater than their servants” (since when are servants greater than their masters?). That is, “If the Master washes your feet, you should wash each other’s feet as a sign of humble service”.

But Jesus doesn’t say that. He says, “Servants are not greater than their Master.” What does he mean by that, particularly in the light of the overriding “approaching death” theme of John 11-17, and his intentional “death” words at the inauguration of this sacramental act?

The only conclusion we can come to, in the light of the above evidence, is that Jesus is acting out and talking about the reality of his own death. And what he is communicating, both through word and sign, is that if they continue to follow him, then Jesus’ disciples will face death as well. The “servant” disciples are not greater than is the Master himself. If he is killed by the systems, so the systems will kill them as well – if they remain faithful to the task of declaring and working for the Shalom Community ordering the world’s political, economic and religious life. They, too, will be perceived as revolutionaries. And therefore, they too, will be sentenced to death!

This is what Peter so clearly understood when he refused to have his feet washed. He could see the “clear and present danger”! And *this* was why Jesus went to great lengths to point out to the disciples that one from their very midst would not remain faithful to their corporate vision, but would betray Jesus (13:10-11, 18-19) and why this story is followed by the story of Jesus’ foretelling of Judas’ betrayal (13:21-30).

What Jesus is doing and saying in inaugurating the sacramental act of foot washing is that not just he, but all who faithfully follow him will face rejection, suffering, persecution and death at the hands of the political, economic and religious powers of their day. Therefore, he is teaching them through word and sign that they are to support and encourage each other as a faith community in each disciple’s effort to live faithful to Jesus’ calling. They are to “wash” and to keep on washing “each other’s feet.” And if they are not both willing to “die” and to support each other in being faithful to this heavenly vision (no matter how the powers oppress, exploit, control or seek to seduce them), then “you have no share in me”!

The text, after the foot washing, immediately moves on to Jesus’ dealing with the impending actions of key people in his community whose desires to avoid persecution or death will lead them to perform acts that will strike at the very heart of the community. In 13:21-30, Jesus quietly exposes to Judas that he knows Judas will betray him – and Judas leaves the company of the disciples to begin that act of betrayal. And in 13:36-38, Jesus reveals directly to Peter that this “rock” of the church (1:42) will become as shifting sand, denying Jesus three times. So even as Jesus speaks about the essence of the beloved community, members of that community are already acting in ways that will compromise both Jesus and that community.

Between his exposure of Judas and Peter, Jesus reminds them that he will soon be killed, and then reminds them of what their community is to be all about. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:34-35).

Here is the summary of what the community is to be about. It is to love each other as Jesus has loved them. This will be their real testimony and witness as a Church – whether or not they so love each other, it will be discernible to the world. It is the single commandment for a new community, more important than the Ten Commandments that symbolize that false community that has been formed around the political, economic and religious alliance of the Pharisees, priests and Judeans. And in the matter of a few hours, that new community would be shattered by betrayal, denial and abandonment!²

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14 records another “sacramental” act – an act every bit as powerful and formative for the Jewish people as is the sacrament of Holy Communion to the Christian people. This is the story of the inauguration of the Feast of the Passover.

Exodus 12 records the events surrounding the initial observation of the Feast of the Passover. Israel is in bondage to the Pharaoh of Egypt who has refused to “let them go” to worship God in the desert. Repeated plagues brought by God through Moses have rocked Egypt politically, economically and religiously. But Pharaoh refuses to yield to such pressure. Now God is planning the greatest of all plagues – the slaying in a single night of the firstborn of all the families and livestock of Egypt – even within the household of Pharaoh.

Instructions have come forth from God to the Israelites about how they are to protect themselves against this angel of death. They are to gather in their households, sacrifice a lamb or goat, and smear its blood on the lintels of their doors so that the angel will know not to enter. Then they are to gather in the home for a hastily eaten meal of the slain lamb, packed and ready to leave at a moment’s notice. Thus, they await their liberation as the angel of death “passes over” their homes and inflicts death upon the Egyptians.

“This day shall be a day of remembrance for you,” the author of Exodus informs the people. “You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance” (12:14). And this the Jewish people have done for more than 3,000 years – even until today!

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 is a hymn of praise to God in which the Psalmist offers thanksgiving to God for recovery from a near-fatal illness. It begins with the most personal statement imaginable.

“I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplication. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live” (vss. 1-2).

There is no expression of love of God for love of God or for God’s love of the psalmist. Gratitude to God is most unabashedly based on what God can do (and has done) for this hymn writer. God “heard my voice and my supplication” and “inclined his ear to me”. Therefore, this

² This exposition on the Gospel of John has been greatly enhanced by the biblical research done on this book by Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John’s Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 289-318.

writer will praise and love God. It is a purely responsive theology – God did good to me when I most needed it; now I will do good to him by praising him.

But although the psalm begins on such a pragmatic note, it eventually moves beyond that to a more grateful and far more eloquent act of praise.

“What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones. Lord, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving girl. You have loosed my bonds. I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the Lord!” (vss. 12-19)

The setting for this portion of the psalm (and, perhaps, the entire psalm) is that of the formal thanksgiving offering of Israelite worship (Leviticus 6:11-21; cf. King Hezekiah’s prayer in Isa. 38:10-20). The thanksgiving offering (also called “the offering of well-being”) was to be offered after recovery from a severe illness. It consisted of two parts. The first was an act of worship, performed in the Temple in Jerusalem (cf. vs. 18-19) “in the presence of all his people”. The priest was to offer both a burnt offering to God and a meal offering made into cakes (like a pancake). The second part of the thanksgiving offering was a celebratory banquet with one’s family and friends, in which a toast was made to God (“I will lift up the cup of salvation” – vs. 13) and consume together the burnt offering. The banquet could last as long as two days, according to the Torah, but on the third day, any part of the carcass of the burnt offering was to be destroyed by burning it to a crisp.

It is clear that what is being described in Psalm 116 is the thanksgiving offering, both in the grateful worship of God and in the celebration of the Psalmist’s friends over his recovery. But why would this be the Psalm selected for Maundy Thursday? The gospel lesson places the primary emphasis of this solemn festival upon the sacramental act of the washing of the disciples’ feet, thus reminding us of the sacrifice placing our trust in Jesus requires. But this lesson from the Psalms reminds us of the Eucharistic nature of the same festival, as we “raise the cup” to God, break the sacrificial bread and consume the flesh of the One broken for us! By so doing, we witness that we, too, have been delivered from the deepest of spiritual death, but that we are delivered to submit our bodies as a thanksgiving sacrifice for our Lord (I Cor. 11).

I Corinthians 11:23-26 reminds us of Jesus’ institution of the Lord’s Supper. “In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup”, Paul the Apostle declares, “you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (11:25-26).

In his first letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul reminds them of the importance of regularly and continually celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion. The cup filled with wine, he tells them, is a symbol of the new covenant that lies between Jesus and the church, created through the shedding of his blood. The torn bread reminds us of Jesus’ torn flesh, broken for us. As long

as you conduct this sacrament, the apostle reminds us, “you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

The celebration of the Passover around a slain lamb. The thanksgiving of the Offering of Well-being in which the cup is raised to God. The observance of the drinking of wine and eating of bread together to remind us of Christ, the Passover Lamb, who was sacrificed for us so that we might live. The washing of one another’s feet as the act of unity of God’s people who are willing to die for Christ and His Kingdom. All these acts remind us that the Word of God is preached to us in two ways – through verbal means and through visual means. The Passover, the Offering of Well-being, the washing of one another’s feet, the celebration of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper all remind us that we human beings need the Word to be acted out in and among us as well as spoken to us, if we are to be sustained in the mystery of our Faith!

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(Cycle A Lent Holy Week 5.doc)