

Maundy Thursday
9/4/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14
Psalm 116
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 33-35

Maundy Thursday: a mandate is given “do this”

The name for Maundy Thursday is so ancient there is some doubt about what it means. Traditionally it has been associated with a late Latin corruption of the word *mandatum* – commandment, which refers to the instructions Christ gave his disciples on this day. Another possibility is a link with the Latin *mundo* - to wash, referring to the footwashing, and yet another is linked to the Saxon *maund* - basket, referring to the distribution of money and food to the poor.

All of these have meaning here, for this celebration sets the scene for life in the Christian community. Jesus’ “do this” is a command, which establishes a mandate to love, to serve, and to celebrate the Eucharist.

Lets take those three in reverse order. Holy eating and drinking is a sign that is known across many cultures. In the church our celebration of the Eucharist has been linked to Jesus’ last meal but its associations with the Passover mean that its links go back much further. Passover was an annual meal celebrating God’s gift of life in setting the people free from slavery. There are many layers of meaning here, but the central one is that Pharaoh was seen as a god who had the power of death, as shown when he ordered all male Hebrew children to be killed in the story of the Midwives. On the other hand the God of Israel has the power of life and here life contends with death and wins.

Another thing Passover celebrates is that freedom was a gift to the Israelites – they did not create it themselves. And in eating the Paschal Lamb they remember, whose they are and who created them.

On the way from Passover to the Eucharist of the church, the meal is translated into a new mode. In John, Jesus does not eat the Passover, he IS the Passover, and this is reflected in the tradition as passed on by Paul. It is the suffering of Jesus, which sets us free. By his self-giving we are created as a people and his command “do this” is a core sign of our identity. Whereas the descendants of Abraham in the present day understand that they passed into freedom in the loins of their ancestors, we also find in the word “remember” a depth of association with the past that recreates the effect of the original event for us in the present. We are speaking of a deep mystery here, the meaning of which slowly unfolds as we live it for many years.

The second thing is, there is a pattern of association between this meal and the action of foot washing. We are right to see here another “do this”. It is a mark of the sort of community that is created by Jesus Christ. In John we see that Jesus is fully aware of who he is and that the Passover is his hour: his time has come. As he passes to the Father he brings to fulfilment the movement prefigured in the Exodus. Every gesture means something. When Jesus lays aside his garments he is laying aside his glory to subvert the false glory of the world. In humbling himself to wash feet he further shows what it means to not snatch at equality with God. By this he demonstrates everything about the style of his leadership amongst us, and the sort of leadership he expects to find amongst us. How amazing that in this key moment of our tradition, instead of being given something spectacular or bedazzling, we find the image of a humble servant engaged in the most menial of tasks - the washing of his followers’ feet. This is a powerful sign that signifies what leadership in this community is all about. It costs something to receive this image and to take it to heart: in our own expectation of ourselves, and of others. As Peter’s reaction shows it costs something to allow another to wash our feet. It is hard to receive this sign. But Jesus’ washing of their feet is born of his oneness with God. The corollary is that the way to God is to allow Jesus to serve us in this same way, to allow ourselves to be “made clean” by his work for us. We should not underestimate the power, the humiliation and the humility that are coincidentally present in this gesture. But in this self-giving we catch a glimpse of the radiance of God.

Everything about this scene shows that this is an enactment in which Jesus becomes the concrete symbol of self-giving love. We have this gift because the deepest desire of Jesus’ heart was to join us to God, through self-giving expressed in food shared, and foot washing. The deepest desire: in the N/T and the history of the church desire was the disordered urge that took us away from God. There is one exception. In Luke 22:15 Jesus says: “*I have eagerly desired to celebrate this Passover with you before I suffer...*” This double strength usage reflects a desire to pour himself out in relationship with his disciples, to give himself to us. This is the gift that lies at the heart of the Eucharist. In the upper room desire is hallowed and directed to its proper use. There is a real sense in which in the upper room heaven is opened to show what the life of God among us looks like. That is why we are commanded to love one another as we have been loved by him. Among us it is mandatory to treat one another in the same way as we have been treated by Christ, for he has shown us what God’s love for the world looks like.

We often joke about the response: “what would Jesus do?” but here we are faced with a challenge of staggering proportions. The only way it is possible to regard one another as worthy of such mandatory love, is because here we see that in Christ, God shone a light on us so that we can see ourselves as we are meant to be: people loved by God. Here we see that God who loved the world, loves us, and through Christ opened the way for all people to know that love, and find in it, life in all its fullness. May this gift be renewed in us this Easter.
