

Maundy Thursday
21/04/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 12:1-, 11-14

Psalms 116

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

On keeping a feast: the mandate of Maundy Thursday

We have many ways of remembering things that are important to us. We mark the solstice, we remember the date of our Baptism or marriage, we observe the anniversary of a death, we celebrate a birthday, we commemorate ANZAC day: but we “keep a feast”, such as we are doing tonight. To “keep” something is to retain it, to hold it close, preserve it: to protect it because it means something to our lives, and we want its influence to remain. To keep the feast is to attend to the memories that form the social glue of our community. We keep a feast, because the feast keeps us. [Gail Ramshaw, *The Three Day Feast*, p 9-10].

Maundy Thursday is the first stage of a three-part drama that is core to our faith story. The name for Maundy Thursday is so ancient there is some doubt about what it means but in essence 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. By what he said and did Jesus gave his followers a mandate to love as he has loved, to serve as he has served, and to eat and drink together in memory of him.

Holy eating and drinking is a sign that is known across many cultures. In the church the Eucharist has been linked to Jesus’ last meal but its associations with the Passover mean that it has links that go back much further. Passover is the annual meal celebrating God’s liberating act in setting the people free from slavery. There are many layers of meaning here, but in John, Jesus does not eat the Passover, he IS the Passover, and this is reflected in the tradition as passed on by Paul. On its way to becoming the Eucharist of the church, the Passover is translated into a new mode in which the suffering of Jesus sets us free. His self-giving love for us, represented by bread that is broken and wine that is poured out creates a people, freed and fed by the love of God. We “do this in remembrance of Jesus” as a core sign of our identity.

Christians 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 deep and things here, the meaning of which slowly unfolds as we live with them for many years.

Jesus' "do this" extends to the action of foot washing, which is another mark of the sort of community that is created by him. In this every gesture means something. When Jesus lays aside his garments it equates with him laying aside his glory to subvert the false glory of the world. In humbling himself to wash feet he demonstrates what it meant that he did not snatch at equality with God. In this key moment, 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 action demonstrates everything about the style of Jesus' leadership amongst us, and the sort of leadership he expects to exercise towards one another. As the reaction of Peter shows, it costs something to receive this sign and to take it to heart. We should not underestimate the humiliation the humility and the power that are simultaneously present in this gesture.

It is interesting that the Passover was an annual feast, while we share Eucharist every week, and that we wash one another's feet only once a year. I sometimes wonder what it would do to our community life if we had foot washing every Sunday?

The third element is added in the last word of our reading: Jesus' command to love one another, as we have been loved - by him. This completes our mandate.

We know about mandates. If someone arrives in this country without proper reason or paper, it is mandatory that they be detained. In contrast, among us it is mandatory to treat one another in the same way as we have been treated according to God's love for the world revealed in Jesus Christ. This is a significant challenge.

The one thing that makes it possible to regard one another as worthy of such mandatory love is that in this meal with its food and its foot washing a light has been shone for on us. Heaven is opened. At this table we are enabled to see that God who loved the world and gave the son, did so that all people may receive such love. The purpose was that in a life filled with such love, all may find what John calls fullness of life.
