

The continuing banquet

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2009.

I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night before he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

We are gathered this evening to do precisely what Jesus asked us to do on the night before he died. We have been faithful in keeping this act of remembrance for the past two thousand years. Whether we call it the Lord's Supper, The Holy Communion, the Holy Eucharist or the Mass, this is the greatest act of devotion we can offer to God. The bread and wine we partake are signs of Christ's presence among us. The celebration of the Eucharist is most sacred and it is not to be trivialized nor treated casually. This sacred meal can be celebrated very simply or very elaborately, depending on the occasion and local custom.

Mealtime is an intimate experience. Most of us are particular about those with whom we share a meal. We like to be with those with whom we are compatible and whose company we enjoy. If we are at a business or working lunch, it can be a pleasure or a dutiful chore. It is an ordeal to be stuck at a dinner next to someone who either has nothing to say or who is tiresome and self-absorbed. We like to enjoy our meal times and want to share them with those who are engaging and stimulating and not make meal time a chore.

When we meet together to celebrate the Eucharist, we may kneel next to those with whom we disagree and don't particularly like. On those occasions we are reminded that God's love is for all of us. We share this most intimate of sacred meals with all sorts and conditions of God's people.

The name "Maundy Thursday" is taken from the Latin *mandatum novum*, referring to "the new commandment" of Jesus to love others as he loves us. Jesus' own love for us is demonstrated in his willingness to undergo his humiliation, his suffering and death on the cross as the greatest and most powerful example of love and forgiveness.

As we gather now in this very real and intimate way, we are brought close to Christ in these elements of bread and wine. As he took the bread and the cup, blessed it and shared it among his friends, so we now bless and share this bread and wine as signs of his very real presence among us. When the bread and wine are blessed, they are set aside and made holy for this sacred meal. It is no longer ordinary bread and wine, but Christ's whole person, his life, his teaching and his example of compassion and sacrificial love for us.

The two most important elements in this sacrament are thanksgiving and offering. We are offering our thanks to God for the gift of Christ's example of sacrificial love and we make an offering of our selves in return. When someone does something for us, we want to do something in return. In this celebration of the Eucharist we have the opportunity to offer our whole selves, our souls and bodies, as a living sacrifice in return for what has been given us in Christ.

Contained within the word Eucharist is the Greek word, *charis*, which means grace, that unmerited, undeserved unconditional love of God for us. When we say a blessing or grace before sharing a meal, we give thanks to God not only for our food but that we might be mindful and responsive to those who have little or nothing.

When a dispute arose among the disciples about who was the greatest and who deserved places of honor with him, Jesus explained that there is no such recognition in the kingdom. There is neither merit nor honor in the sight of God; we are all one in Christ. The spirit of the Eucharist is egalitarian as we present ourselves before the altar and share in the same sacred meal. We bring before God our uncertain and broken selves to be renewed and strengthened to go out and serve in Christ's name.

Think about this as you come forward to the altar tonight. You are following in that long line of faithful people who have kept Christ's commandment to share in this sacred meal. We are joining with all the saints, living and dead, in this great act of thanksgiving. You and I are part of a long line of witnesses stretching back two thousand years to the night before Jesus died when he took the bread and wine and blessed it and gave it to his disciples in remembrance of him. In following his command, we are expressing our complete oneness with Christ with all the faithful, both living and dead. This is what makes us part of that great cloud of witnesses known as the communion of saints.

Take this sacrament to your comfort and partake of these very signs of Christ's presence. Let it renew your spirit and give you strength to meet the days ahead. Let these signs of bread and wine remind us that we meet Christ in all people, at all times, in all places and in all the events of our lives. That is the great gift he left for us.