

That Powerful And Commanding Presence
Maundy Thursday
Luke 22: 14-23
1 April 2010

Traditionally John's account of the foot washing is read out on Maundy Thursday evening. This year I am doing something different, and we are going with the Lukan description of the institution of the Lord's Supper. John doesn't describe that at all in his gospel, and apart from the fact that I have preached often about his substitute for it the washing of feet, I find, at present anyway, that there is a lot more useful material for us in Luke.

Of all the ways that Jesus Christ is present to the Christian community, the Eucharist is by the reckoning of many the most outstanding and influential. So it deserves our attention and consideration often, particularly from the perspective of the events of Holy Week, from which it takes its origins, and whose meaning it explains and contains in a wealth of symbolic association more than anything else we do. What is more he said, "Keep doing this as a remembrance of me," so this is a ritual activity that ought to be high on the Christian Community's regular worship priority list. I am at a loss to understand those churches that don't celebrate the Eucharist at least weekly, when they are often churches that then go on to claim that they place a high value on ordering their life by the commands of Scripture. Could Jesus have been clearer or more emphatic in what he requests us to do this evening?

At one level this sacred meal looks back on the past three years of Jesus' ministry, all that he said and did, and is a means of projecting that forward in to

the life of those who come after. His mission in Galilee has failed, and his mission to Jerusalem is failing. What is more, it is not just that the crowds and the religious leaders haven't got what he was on about, but even his closest followers are far from a mature understanding and clear commitment to the message about the Kingdom. Nor have they yet grasped the centrality of Jesus to both bringing in the Kingdom, and to summing it up in his own person. Repeating this sacred action gives them, and those who come after them, the opportunity to enter into that enlarged understanding. The symbolic actions of taking, blessing, breaking and sharing do that. But also over time the Christian community will add on to the front end of this sacred meal a time of Scripture reading, teaching and preaching so that all that Jesus said and did can be handed on and explained at some depth. We might add that this ministry of the word will also be an agency of re-interpreting Israel's Scriptures and its past to show how they point to Christ.

Yet more crucially this sacred meal will engage directly with that part of Jesus' teaching that the disciples have found the most difficult and painful to come to terms with – how he must suffer and die at the hands of sinful men, that this must be accepted as part of God's plan, and that through this and beyond it is an outcome that God will bring about in such a way as to stagger the religious imaginations of all who will hear of it. If the life and teaching of Jesus was a big ask for them to get their heads around, his sacrificial death and resurrection will be a bridge too far for them at present. They have heard what he has had to say on the subject, but it hasn't sunk in or been comprehended, largely because they don't want to.

When we enter in to this Eucharistic action, when we then go on to receive communion, we download as it were the life giving consequences of his death and resurrection. We become contemporaneous with the events of Gethsemane, Calvary, and the empty tomb in such a way that this switch of time zones quickens in us our apprehension, comprehension and empathetic understanding of the love of Christ crucified for us. This amounts to more than the opportunity for high marks in a doctrine test, or a heart warming devotional experience. This is about remembering in a Scriptural sense, not just as a fond memory, but a making available what Timothy Luke Johnson calls that powerful and commanding presence.

Before he became that historical personage Jesus of Nazareth, the second person of the Trinity was a life giving Spirit. As the life of that particular individual Jesus of Nazareth is about to end, as he is about to become the hanged man on Golgotha, he is about the business of distributing that life giving Spirit through a variety of means. This subtly changed Jewish fellowship meal now acquires a new ritual focus to become one of the principal means of making available that life giving Spirit.

“Take this and share it among you.” He is devolving his ministry, his mission, and his spiritual authority among his closest followers. The disciples are thereby placed in a process of transition towards becoming the apostolic band. One of their principal tasks will be to keep the new people of God on track and faithful to his mission and teaching. This sacred meal will vivify the memory of him in such a way as to resource that true teaching function of theirs.

It has been said of the Last Supper that it consists of a series of toasts to God. True enough! But as we look down into that cup of wine before drinking from it we need to be aware that it is also an invitation to share in the cup of his sufferings. To become an effective Christian is to go looking for trouble. Evil is abroad in our world to such an extent that a life aglow with Christian promise doesn't need to do anything much to bring down the wrath of the lords of misrule on it. And if we speak the name we risk being mocked and reviled. So at Mass we drink an oath of blood solidarity with Jesus in the travails of his passion. "Yours in the jaws of death," is our toast to him.

I said before that here we eat and drink of his life giving Spirit. It is not that we become as a result little Gods. There are rather too many posing as them in our world. But it is true that fresh resources of Divine being are poured in to us as we receive communion, providing that we do not block the receiving of them. We are united with God, brought close to his heart, provided with an extra dimension of our faith existence. The Spirit of Christ enters us in such a way that we are enabled to become the best that we can be as Christians, within the limitations of our abilities and our personalities. That powerful and commanding presence of his becomes internalised as we eat and drink these signs of his hospitality. His was the best of lives, and the bravest of deaths. That cross-shaped pattern of the life that really is life becomes more possible for us as we access that presence, and become more the person he is through the sacred meal he instituted.

