

Maundy Thursday

April 1, 2010

SHOWING FORTH THE LORD'S DEATH

We are sometimes a bit taken back when arrive at church on Maundy Thursday to find that the violet or purple, which has adorned the chancel since Pre-Lent, has been replaced with gold (or white, as it is in many churches). Why as we finally draw so near to the day of the crucifixion, or indeed as we begin the day of the crucifixion, since according to Jewish reckoning the day begins at sunset, . . . Why are we greeted not with the purple of penitence and sorrow but with the gold of celebration? The reason is that amidst all that makes this night perhaps the saddest of history, the betrayal, the arrest, the malicious abuse, the trial, if it may be called such, the long trek under the weight of the cross, the nails piercing hands and feet, the scorn of the malefactors, the derision of the crowd, the indescribable agony of three long hours, . . . Amidst all of this we focus this night on our Lord's most gracious gift to his Church, the institution of the sacrament of his body and blood. We call it Maundy Thursday because it is the day of his new mandate, his new commandment that we love one another as he has loved us (Jn. 13:34), the mandate he not only spoke but illustrated by washing his disciples feet, and institutionalized in the sacrament which depicts and ever makes present his sacrificial love, his broken body and poured out blood.

The record of the institution of this Blessed Sacrament is set forth in each of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. John, writing much later, does not repeat the dominical words but tells instead of the foot washing (Jn. 13:1-20). In addition to the three accounts in the Synoptics we have St. Paul's well-known record of the tradition that was entrusted to him by special revelation: "For I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus on the same night in which he was betrayed . . . ," the account which was read to us a short while ago as the Epistle of the day. At the conclusion of this account, after quoting the last of our Lord's words, that about drinking his blood in remembrance of him, Paul adds, "For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death until he comes" (I Cor. 11:26). This is a curious addition . . . in part because it *is* an addition to what our Lord said, in part because it connects *Paul's own interpretation* so closely with the dominical words that were so carefully preserved in all the accounts and is treasured at the heart of the Church's

liturgy to this very day, and in part because it ties *what we do* so intimately with the record of *what our Lord did*.

“For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death until he comes.” What does St. Paul intend by this addition, or rather what did our Lord intend, since it seems to have been given to him by Christ. Our first thought is surely that the celebration of the Holy Eucharist bears witness to the death of Jesus Christ, not only to the fact of its occurrence, but to its centrality in the life of the Christian. Through its observance we remember our Lord’s broken body and the outpouring of his blood, remember it not only by calling it to mind, by reflecting on it, by devoutly giving thanks for what our Lord has done for us and for many, but by reliving it, by making it present as the Jews made present their ancient deliverance in the celebration of the Passover. “This *is* my body. This *is* my blood.”

By this action, Christians embody a number of aspects of the meaning of the Eucharist, and we are often guilty of belittling the manifold character of the sacrament by insisting on the rightness of only one interpretation. The late Jean Héring of the University of Strasbourg wrote in his Commentary on I Corinthians,

If then we are asked to state whether the meaning of the Pauline rite is realistic, symbolic, significative, mystical or ethical, we shall answer that all of these interpretations are valid, on condition that they are not separated from one another. For to St. Paul, the Lord’s Supper has all of these meanings at the same time. It is realistic, because it puts the believer truly (and not in thought only) in contact with Jesus Christ, dead and risen. It is symbolic because it is a representation of His last earthly meal; it is significative because the powers of renewal which the Christian receives are the guarantee of the final resurrection and of entry into the Kingdom of God; mystical because it creates and feeds the body of Christ, the Church; and ethical because it produces between Christians a brotherly communion which must be confirmed and strengthened in it.¹

So if the meaning of the Holy Eucharist incorporates all of these aspects, which of them are in mind with this reference to our “showing” the Lord’s death? I must first say that while the King James version uses the word “shew” here, most other translations use the word “proclaim.” The Greek word is the word for preaching, and therefore some have seen here only a reference to the proclamation, or sermon, that accompanied the sacrament. Even so highly regarded a scholar

¹ *The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians*, tr. A.W. Heathcote and P.J. Allcock (London: The Epworth Press, 1962), p. 119.

as Hans Conzelman writes, “Does Paul mean the Eucharistic action as such is a proclamation of the death of our Lord, or is he thinking of an explicit proclamation accompanying it? Since there is no such thing as a sacrament without accompanying proclamation, we have to assume the latter.”² Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer are more on track when they state, “The Eucharist [itself] is an *acted* sermon, an *acted* proclamation of the death which it commemorates.”³ But St. Paul seems to be saying here that *the believers* in partaking of the meal, not the preacher or the celebrant, are proclaiming the death of the Lord. The ancient Church Father, Ambrosiaster⁴, seems to be closer to the meaning when he says, “Paul shows that the Lord’s Supper is not a meal in the normal sense but spiritual medicine, which purifies the recipient if he partakes of it reverently.”⁵ In other words, if the believer reverently receives the body and blood of Christ, understanding it as the ultimate outpouring of love, that love will of necessity be embodied to some significant degree in him.

Paul is talking about the way in which the body of believers gathered to celebrate the Eucharist proclaim or manifest the death of the Lord. The words of institution proclaim the death of the Lord. The very fact that the body and blood are spoken of separately, which only occurs after a victim is killed, points to the death of the Lord. But the believers are by the embodiment of the love which they celebrate, the love greater than any other as seen in our Lord’s laying down his life for his friends, . . . Believers are by their embodiment of that love to show forth, to demonstrate, to proclaim, his death.

That this is the real focus is borne out by the context. It is the very next verse, closely connected to this one by the word, “wherefore,” that warns us solemnly against eating the bread and drinking the cup of the Lord *unworthily* and thus being *guilty* of the body and blood of Christ (I Cor. 11:27). That is strong language, and the further context contains an illustration of this great offense by citing the lack of love that existed among the Christians at Corinth in the very manner in which they celebrated the sacrament and its larger context of the communal meal.

² *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians (Hermenia)*, tr. James W. Leitch, ed. George W. MacRae (Philadelphia:L Fortress Press, 1975), p. 201.

³ *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians (ICC)*, 2nd edn.,(Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, rp. 1963), p. 249.

⁴ Ambrosiaster (c. 366-384) is the name given by Erasmus to the author of a work once thought to have been written by St. Ambrose.

⁵ *1-2 Corinthians*, ed. Gerald Bray (ACCS), (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 113.

There was no demonstrated love among the believers, no real sharing, no real concern for one another. Each was concerned with his own welfare, his own meal, his own communion, even his own spiritual life, *not discerning the body*, that is, not recognizing in each other the body of Christ of which they supposedly partook and which they were. The mystical body of Christ, that is, the Church, the believers, cannot feed on the sacramental body of Christ, if they do not recognize and love and serve one another. You cannot truly eat the bread in remembrance of Christ's death and drink his blood, unless it reproduces in you that which it symbolizes. Our Lord said that you cannot be his disciple unless you take up your cross and follow him, unless you die to self and let his love transform you. St. Paul said, "I am crucified with Christ." In short, we cannot celebrate the sacrament of love without loving, without loving all of our brothers and sisters, without loving all those whom Christ loved and for whom he died.

We celebrate on this night of nights the institution of the sacrament of Christ's body and blood, that blessed memorial which teaches what it demonstrates, which transforms those who truly receive it, and which enables us to truly heed the mandate for which this day is named, the new commandment to love one another as Christ loved us. It is only by so doing that we truly show forth to the world the Lord's death until he comes.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on Maundy Thursday, April 1, 2010. Copyright © 2010.