



Maundy Thursday, Year B – April 9, 2009

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham

Last night, our Jewish sisters and brothers would have gathered family and friends at table. They would have given thanks and shared bread and wine. A young child would have asked, "Why is this night different from all the rest?" And the story of the Passover, when the Hebrew people were liberated from slavery in Egypt, would have been rehearsed as it has been in Jewish households for thousands of years. As the story progressed, in the form of a true remembrance, the telling would have shifted from the third person they to the first person we. No longer a story about them long ago, but about us today. And not only a story about us today, but one about our hopes for the future, "Next year in Jerusalem!" Around that table, the past, present, and future will have converged.

More than a thousand years after the first Passover, Jesus gathered his disciples at table. We heard tonight in four brief verses from Paul's first letter to the Christian community in Corinth, what may be the first written account of what happened at that supper. A night also when the past, present, and future converged. As they will for us again tonight.

Someone wiser than I has said that the past is only memory, the future can be no more than imagination, and the present is where we are now.

For Jesus on this night some 2000 years ago, now would have been a moment of great foreboding. His memory of the past must have richly fueled his imagination, engendering a stark and vivid vision of his future. He has been popular. Crowds have pursued him every step of his journey. He has gained the attention of powerful religious and political leaders. The Jewish religious elite, the high priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, have followed him, watched him, questioned him, baited him, threatened him. Only his popularity has protected him. Until now. Earlier this week, Jesus brazenly entered the temple area and overturned the moneylenders' tables...perhaps, the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. And just off the screen are the Romans, monitoring this popular, but controversial Jewish prophet and healer, wary of the upheaval he is causing and the threat to order and the Pax Romana.

Considering his past, Jesus easily can imagine his fate, the fate of anyone who has challenged or even just been perceived as a threat to the Roman-Jewish cabal.

The shadow of the cross looms large in his mind.

And what of his followers and disciples? He remembers all the times they simply did not understand him. How his parables puzzled and befuddled them. How they always were so anxious to do just what he did not want done. How will they respond? Jesus must wonder with a pronounced sigh. "Despite all I have tried to teach them, to show them, how easily might they attempt to defend me with the sword... And when I am marched off to trial and crucifixion, because surely, that is coming, will I be surprised if my stalwart disciples panic and scatter in fear. Perhaps, one will even disavow me. Where is their faith? Have they not heard me? Is their fear so great? Even now, I can imagine that one has conspired to

assist in my arrest. Oh, but they are so human. Tonight we will have a last meal together...and then, of course, when I need their company more than ever, they will fall asleep." [sigh] And the crowds, they are so fickle. Will those that shouted 'hosanna?' yesterday, tomorrow shout 'crucify him, crucify him.' Crucify me."

Jesus' fate is as clear to him as to anyone condemned to take up his own cross. Because those who took up their crosses knew there would be no turning back. The only image of their future was a cruel and agonizing death.

But Jesus, ever faithful and obedient, is undeterred.

Knowing he is to be abandoned

Knowing he is to be betrayed.

Knowing he is to be deserted.

Knowing he is to be denied.

Knowing he is to be crucified...

When his imagination can conjure only his few remaining hours in pain and suffering,

What does Jesus do?

Here in the midst of the burgeoning anxiety and withering despair, Jesus gathers his disciples at table for one last supper together, perhaps, even a Passover meal. And he takes a loaf of bread, gives thanks, breaks it and says, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper, he takes the cup, and says, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' In remembrance...

And what is this remembrance of which Jesus speaks? It is why we gather. Around a table. To receive the bread. To receive the wine. The loaf of bread that is his body. Broken for us. The cup of wine that is his blood. Shed for us.

And we begin to understand why this night is special for us?

This is the night we recall, reenact, and relive not only Christ's Last Supper with his disciples, but also the institution of the great sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. A sacrament that calls us and enables us to feast in the convergence of past, present, and future, and in the convergence of our lives with the divine.

In this great sacramental moment of the Holy Eucharist, in this great act of remembrance which Jesus commands, the past, the present, and the future converge. Yes, we remember that supper some 2000 years ago. And we reenact it. And we recall the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But much more than that we relive it. We connect with it. And we live into it. We eat the broken bread conscious of the body broken for us. We drink the blessed wine conscious of the blood shed for us. And here in this precious moment where present and past merge we envision a future redeemed in the darkness of death on a cross and illuminated in the blinding flash of Jesus' emergence from the tomb.

We envision a world where the grip of evil has been broken and where the sting of death is no more. We envision a world where everyone will share the same loaf and drink of the same cup, where unity thrives in diversity, and all come to the same table to share in the nourishment of divine love. We envision the consummation of the kingdom of God on earth and the great heavenly banquet that awaits us.

In this sacrament of bread and wine, of body and blood, we become part of the story that we remember. We see, we touch, we taste these outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace. And enjoy, even sense a divine presence that, perhaps, we cannot explain. But what may elude our minds is yet palpable in our hearts and souls and bodies. This is a moment of great and special grace.

No wonder this night we for a brief time in this holiest of weeks of the church year put aside the violet of penitence and the red of blood in favor of the white of celebration. We celebrate that Jesus was willing to gather his disciples, the same disciples who would abandon, betray, desert, and deny him before the sun rose again and the cock crowed...and in his great love for them sit at table for a last supper and first Eucharistic meal.

And we celebrate that this same Jesus who never hesitated to break bread with sinners, this same Jesus, imagining so painfully how easily and how often we will abandon him, how easily and how often we will betray him, how easily and how often we will desert him, and how easily and how often we will deny him, not only invited us to table, but commanded that we come to his table, bless and break bread and take and bless wine in remembrance of him, his life, his death, his resurrection, and all they mean to us and promise for us.

Thus, tonight we observe and celebrate a moment of great joy. Jesus great gift of love to his disciples in the past becomes on this night in the present a great gift of love for us now and for evermore.

Amen.