

## Devotional Commentary on Maundy Thursday's Biblical Readings

April 9, 2020

### **Overview – A Commandment of Love from *The Lamb* who shows how it's done ...**

Maundy Thursday is the first of what Christians for centuries have called “The Great Three Days”, the Thursday, Friday and Saturday of Holy Week leading up to Easter Sunday.

The word “maundy” comes from Latin and means “commandment”. Yes, Maundy Thursday is “Commandment” Thursday, and the name comes from the Holy Gospel for this day from St. John. After washing the feet of his disciples during the Last Supper, Jesus gave them – and he gives us – a “new commandment” ... that we love one another as Jesus has loved us.

Holy Thursday is deep and rich in spiritual messages and meaning for us and our faith, even beyond our new commandment; and all our biblical readings speak to the day's multiple messages, tied together in and through Jesus.

Jesus and his followers had gathered that night to observe and celebrate the Passover. Our First Reading takes us back to the night of the first Passover as the blood of a lamb spares God's people Israel from the angel of death as they gather in faith for a special meal prescribed by the God who was delivering them from slavery. The true Lamb of God, who the next day would shed his blood to deliver us all from death, was the host of the Passover meal in that Upper Room.

And during the Passover meal with his followers, Jesus not only gave them a new commandment of love. He also gave them a new meaning to the meal. Indeed, he gave them a new meal ... a new covenant in which he, the Lamb of God, comes to his people in bread and wine, Body and Blood, for the gracious strengthening of our faith and the forgiving of our sins. Our Second Reading is St. Paul's retelling of the first Holy Communion ... the words of Jesus we still retell whenever we gather in remembrance of him around his table.

Of course, Jesus didn't stay at that Passover table on the first Holy Thursday ... he went from there to Gethsemane and the Sanhedrin and Pilate's palace and then Calvary ... all in love for every one of us! And as often as we gather in remembrance and celebration around Jesus' table, we do not stay there, do we? No, in obedience to his new commandment and in his footsteps, we go out into our world ... doing our best to love one another and our neighbors as we know God in Jesus so completely, wonderfully, graciously loves us!

This Maundy Thursday, as much as we would love to be together, gathered as one around the table of our Lord in song, scripture, prayer and meal, we cannot safely do that. We certainly are able, however, in our homes and with our loved ones, to reflect upon the biblical messages ... to be open to the Spirit's power in our hearts and faith and lives ... to pray in deep faith for God's deliverance from this pandemic that separates us and for the day when we will be together again.

#### The Prayer of the Day:

Holy God, source of all love, on the night of his betrayal, Jesus gave us a new commandment, to love one another as he loves us. Write this commandment in our hearts, and give us the will to serve others as he was the servant of all, your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

#### The First Reading: Exodus 12:1-14 ... *The Passover of the Lord*

<sup>1</sup>The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: <sup>2</sup>This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. <sup>3</sup>Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. <sup>4</sup>If a

household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. <sup>5</sup>Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. <sup>6</sup>You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. <sup>7</sup>They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. <sup>8</sup>They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. <sup>9</sup>Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. <sup>10</sup>You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. <sup>11</sup>This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord. <sup>12</sup>For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. <sup>13</sup>The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

<sup>14</sup>This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

**Commentary:** The book of Exodus was probably assembled as one book sometime in the 5<sup>th</sup> century before Jesus, weaving together passages and stories from earlier Hebrew sources. The directions for keeping *Pesach* (the Passover meal) in chapter 12 derive from what is called “priestly sources” written during the Babylonian exile. By the time Exodus was put together, two ancient Israelite festivals, *Pesach*, the rite at which newborn lambs were sacrificed, and *Unleavened Bread*, an agricultural rite at which farmers commemorated the year’s first barley harvest, had been combined into the springtime celebration of what was understood as the historic event of the liberation of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. The lamb’s blood is seen as the sign that God will save the people from the punishment of the tenth plague, the angel of death.

Most 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christians (the time when John’s gospel was most probably written) continued to keep the Jewish Passover. Over the decades, the celebration moved from the date of *Pesach* to the following Sunday, because the primary focus had evolved from a memorial of God’s liberation of the ancient Israel into a Christian praise for Jesus’ resurrection, which is always celebrated on a Sunday. At the *Seder* meal of Passover still today, Jews tell the story of Exodus 12. We Christians remember the old Passover as a parallel to *the new Passover*. Over the *Three Days* we keep the Christian Passover: Jesus is the lamb whose blood ... whose sacrifice on the Cross ... saves God’s people from death.

**Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 ... I will lift the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.**

<sup>1</sup>I love the Lord, who has heard my voice,  
and listened to my supplication,

<sup>2</sup>for the Lord has given ear to me  
whenever I called.

<sup>12</sup>How shall I repay the Lord  
for all the good things God has done for me?

<sup>13</sup>I will lift the cup of salvation  
and call on the name of the Lord.

<sup>14</sup>I will fulfill my vows to the Lord  
in the presence of all God’s people.

<sup>15</sup>Precious in your sight, O Lord,  
is the death of your servants.

<sup>16</sup>O Lord, truly I am your servant;

I am your servant, the child of your handmaid; you have freed me from my bonds.

<sup>17</sup>I will offer you the sacrifice of thanksgiving  
and call upon the name of the Lord.

<sup>18</sup>I will fulfill my vows to the Lord  
in the presence of all God's people,

<sup>19</sup>in the courts of the Lord's house,  
in the midst of you, O Jerusalem.

We respond to the story of the Passover meal with our psalm of thanksgiving. In the words of this psalm, we join the ancient Israelites by lifting the cup of salvation, our sacrifice of thanksgiving, for we too have been freed from our bonds. In anticipation of the foot washing, we call ourselves God's servants.

### The Second Reading: First Corinthians 11:23-26 ... Proclaim the Lord's death until he comes

<sup>23</sup>For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, <sup>24</sup>and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." <sup>25</sup>In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." <sup>26</sup>For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Commentary: In about the year 54, St. Paul wrote to the Christian community in the Greek city of Corinth, in part to rein in what he considered to be their inappropriate behavior. Touching on many practical questions, Paul urged that love be the guide for Christian communal life. In chapter 11, Paul claimed to have received from the risen Christ instructions for the Corinthians' communal meal. In this, the earliest existing written account of the last supper, Paul is issuing a corrective to their holy communion practice, which he said had, unfortunately and inappropriately, recognized social stratifications and did not sufficiently proclaim the death of Christ.

Appropriately on Maundy Thursday, since the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke join St. Paul in placing the first Holy Communion during the Last Supper, our Second Reading is Paul's narration of that last supper with the disciples before Jesus' death. During our *Three Days*, our Holy Communion follows Paul's advice (were we able to actually be together this year): we share food equally, as one loving body, and we see the meaning of the meal in the death of Christ.

### The Holy Gospel: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

<sup>1</sup>Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. <sup>2</sup>The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper <sup>3</sup>Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, <sup>4</sup>got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. <sup>5</sup>Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. <sup>6</sup>He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" <sup>7</sup>Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." <sup>8</sup>Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." <sup>9</sup>Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." <sup>11</sup>For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

<sup>12</sup>After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? <sup>13</sup>You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup>So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. <sup>15</sup>For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup>Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. <sup>17</sup>If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

<sup>31b</sup>“Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. <sup>32</sup>If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. <sup>33</sup>Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ <sup>34</sup>I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

**Commentary:** Biblical scholars often describe the Gospel of John as having two parts, the Book of Signs, chapters 1–12, and the Book of Glory, chapters 13–21. The Book of Glory narrates the last days of Jesus’ life, his lengthy final discourses, and his resurrection appearances. John describes the crucifixion — Jesus being lifted up — as the glorious culmination of his divine identity and mission ... remember that it is John who quotes Jesus as saying “It is finished!” as his final words before dying. The Book of Glory begins with our Gospel, the story of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, the highlight being his washing their feet as a symbol of loving service.

Our worship liturgies on the *Three Days*, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, feature the Gospel of John, which is the last-written, youngest of the New Testament gospels, and has been described since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century as, “like an eagle, the gospel that flies highest and sees farthest” in terms of the meaning of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. In John, the meal (Holy Communion) signifies the Body of Christ by connecting Jesus with the literal bodies of the believing community not only by means of bread and wine, but also by means of the servant’s task of foot-washing ... by means of giving and receiving love as we have been loved by God in Christ Jesus. *After the foot-washing, Jesus spoke about his coming death as the glorification of God!* Interesting, Yes! Please keep this in minds as your read/pray through our Thursday Order of Worship.

**For Spiritual Reflection:** *All We Need Is Love!*

Jesus’ command today to love one another is not about having good feelings for each other or being “nice” to one another. Jesus tells his disciples that they are to love one another “just as I have loved you.” By this definition, love means compassion, mercy, and plenty of hard work. As we see in today’s Gospel, Jesus’ love is active in service and, ultimately, in sacrifice. *All we need is love*, but to love as Jesus loves is no easy thing.

Jesus’ love is all-inclusive. It is not meant only for the inner circle. Taken in the context of Jesus’ teaching and ministry, his love, and the love he has in mind for us, is offered to all of humanity and, in fact, all of God’s creation. The world will know that the church follows Jesus not only by our behavior within our own community, but also as we relate to everyone and everything in the world. To love as Jesus loved is to cross boundaries, to stand with the lowliest among us, and to challenge the accepted ways in which the world does business.

The Gospel of John is the only one of the four gospels in which Jesus does not institute the Lord’s supper at his last Passover with the disciples. At John’s last supper Jesus gives himself to them in a different way. His washing of his disciples’ feet is an enactment of his witness to the Kingdom of God — the coming of *God’s* rule; *God’s* way of doing things; *God’s* value system for how we live together: the first will be last; the lowly will be lifted up; whoever loves their life will lose it. This foot-washing act of self-sacrifice, one which prefigures Jesus’ death on the cross, is a living example of Jesus’ countercultural

definition of love, one which he passes on to the twelve ... and to us. Washed by Jesus in our baptisms, we too are blessed with – and challenged by – God’s love in Christ and the command to share this sacrificial love with the whole world.

A Second Prayer of the Day –

Eternal God, in the sharing of a meal your Son established a new covenant for all people, and in the washing of feet he showed us the dignity of service. Grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit these signs of our life in faith may speak again to our hearts, feed our spirits, and refresh our bodies, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

A Closing Prayer –

God, our peace and our strength, we pray for our nation and the world as we face new uncertainties around coronavirus. Protect the most vulnerable among us, especially all who are currently sick or in isolation. Grant wisdom, patience, and clarity to health care workers, especially as their work caring for others puts them at great risk. Guide us as we consider how best to prepare and respond in our families, congregations, workplaces, and communities. Give us courage to face these days not with fear but with compassion, concern, and acts of service, trusting that you abide with us always; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**