

Maundy Thursday, Year B, 2009
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With today's liturgy, we begin the commemoration our Lord's Last Supper. The Last Supper was probably a Passover meal, ancient Judaism's most sacred meal and the beginning of its most sacred days of the year. That the Last Supper was a Passover meal is not known with certainty. Three of the Gospels say that it was. John says that the timing is off, by a day and that the Last Supper was on the eve of Passover. Passover meal or not, Passover was certainly on the minds of every Jew of the day, and much on the mind of Jesus. The Passover feast contributes significantly to our understanding of the Last Supper and our understanding of Christ as the Paschal Lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

For Christians, this Last Supper is loaded with special meaning. It gives us the Scriptural warrant for the Eucharist, the principal act of our Christian life together, and the focus of our worship of the Risen Lord. The emphatic nature of our Lord's comments about the bread and wine is the basis of our understanding of the Eucharist and our Lord's Real Presence in the consecrated bread and wine. Jesus said, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Likewise, he took the cup, after supper, and said, "This cup, which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me."

Now, I could spend hours talking about the Eucharist and the Passover theology of the Eucharist. For Jews, Passover commemorates their deliverance from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. The Eucharist, for us, celebrates our deliverance from the bondage of slavery to sin. However, what we need to understand, with this liturgy, is the human impact on the thirteen people gathered in that room for the Paschal meal.

One of our Lord's own disciples was a traitor. Jesus knew this; he knew what Judas would do and he knew, too well, what would come from the betrayal. Remember, though, that no one else in the room was aware of Judas' intention. They knew that there was a threat to Jesus, but they were not aware of the proximity of that threat. Jesus told his disciples that one of their own would betray him, but Jesus did not name Judas. It's interesting that many said, "Who will betray you Lord? Is it I? Am I the one?" What does this say about self-doubt? What does this say about our own self-doubt? How have we betrayed Jesus? How have we offended Jesus? Are we even aware of what we do to our Lord?

In the midst of the finality of that Last Supper, there was another question. "What happens to us now," the disciples must have asked? Where do we go from here? Isn't this the end of it all? The disciples had given much to follow Jesus. They had, to use figurative language, put all of their eggs into one basket. If this Last Supper ended the quest, what was left for hope?

Our Lord told them that his disciples must continue to meet together, and break bread together, and share a glass of wine. Jesus promised that he would be present, in the bread

and in the wine. We believe that our lord is present, in the consecrated bread and in the consecrated wine because he said he would be. It is as simple as this: "This is my Body; do this in remembrance of me." "This is my Blood of the New Covenant, do this in remembrance of me."

Our Lord did something else that night, strange to us, in today's Western culture, but even more shocking to the disciples, because in doing it, Jesus turned the tables on them. He humbled himself to be their servant, and more! Not even a Jewish slave was required forfeit dignity by doing an act as lowly as washing another person's feet. Jesus did this for the simple reason that he wanted us to understand that the call to discipleship is a call to humility and servanthood. For the Christian community to exist there must be a universal sense of humility and servanthood, in which pride is never a barrier. Pride, it is said, "goeth before the fall." Better stated, pride leads to the fall, which is perhaps why the Church teaches that pride is original sin. In Saint Luke's account of this event, Jesus said, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves."

To give of oneself, to freely and voluntarily become the servant of others is an act of love. Our Lord washed the feet of his disciples as a symbol of his love for them. On that fateful night, even while Judas was in the very act of betrayal, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and he said this to them, "I give you a new commandment. Love one another, even as I have loved you. If you have love for one another, all men will know that you are my disciples. *Amen.*"