

Lenten Luncheon Reflections
Wednesday, March 5, 2008
Jesus Shares the Last Supper with His Disciples
and Prays in the Garden of Gethsemane

Opening Hymn No. 45 “Wonderful Words of Life” stanzas 1 and 3.

Prayer:

Gracious God, we praise you for all who have enabled us to hear and to believe your wonderful words of life as you have spoken them to us and to the whole world in Jesus Christ your Son. We thank you that he is the bread of life who in word and in deed gave of his very life to show us how much you love us. For the wonder of your love seen in him as well as in your daily provisions for our lives such as we have shared around these tables this day we give you praise and thanks in his name and for his sake. Amen.

When we trace the events of Holy Week there is probably none that is more familiar to most of us outside of the Palm Sunday story of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week than the events of Thursday evening to which we turn our attention today. Outside of Christmas Eve this is one of the few times when many churches, including our own, take the time for a worship service other than on Sundays. The celebration of the events of this Thursday are ones that often are celebrated as part of what is called a Maundy Thursday service. It is interesting when we think about that name Maundy to see the way in which the stories of this day in the Gospel records become combined. The name Maundy

comes from the Latin word, “mandate,” which means commandment. As such the name is given to the day on which according to John’s Gospel Jesus washed the disciples’ feet and then gave them a new commandment when he said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another.” (John 13:34) The washing of the disciples feet and the giving of this new commandment are found only in John’s Gospel. For some churches Maundy Thursday becomes the occasion to re-enact the way in which Jesus washed the disciples’ feet. For most churches, including our own, though, the emphasis of the Maundy Thursday services tends to be more towards what Matthew, Mark and Luke record as the events of the Thursday of Holy Week, namely, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper as a way of remembering the Last Supper which Jesus shared with his disciples on that night. Since during Lent this year our focus has been on the celebration of Holy Week as recorded in Mark’s Gospel we will center our reflections today around what he records in chapter 14 of his Gospel.

In Mark 14 beginning to read at verse 12 we read: (Mark 14:12-16)
On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to Jesus, "Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" [13] So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, [14] and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' [15] He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there." [16] So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

As we hear these words it is clear as with the story of his entry into Jerusalem Jesus has given this celebration of the Passover meal with his disciples

some preplanning and forethought. He sends only two of his disciples to make the arrangements in this location on which he and the owner of the house had obviously agreed beforehand. The sight of a man carrying a water jar would have been unusual. Such work was generally left to the women. If the men carried water it was in wineskins. The fact that only two were sent to make the preparations in this secret location indicates the concern of Jesus to share this meal with his disciples. In the previous verses we had been told that Judas was going to be on a look out for a convenient time and place to betray Jesus to the authorities. Jesus did not want this special meal to be interrupted by Judas being aware of the location beforehand. Although tourists visiting Jerusalem today are taken to what is thought to have been the upper room in which Jesus shared this meal with his disciples we are not told by Mark whether it was in fact his home, or indeed whether it was the same room in which Jesus finds the disciples hiding away for fear of the Jewish authorities when he returns to them on Easter evening.

Wherever the location was the disciples make ready for what no doubt for them would be the traditional Passover meal which since their earliest days they had been accustomed to celebrating with their families. This was the meal which remembered and celebrated the Exodus of the Israelite people out of the bondage and slavery of Egypt. Although Jews sat at table for ordinary meals, at banquets it was customary to recline on rugs, cushions, or couches and eat from low tables, in the Roman fashion. This is not generally the way in which most churches, including our own, try to re-enact this last Supper that Jesus celebrated with his disciples. The reclining on couches to eat the Passover meal was particularly important even for poor people because it symbolized the freedom God had conferred on the people of Israel at the exodus. In that world free people did not just sit, they reclined. Celebrating Passover in this way was the way in which Jews despite oppression and persecution, and at that time domination by the Roman

authorities, were saying loud and clear, “despite appearances, we are God’s free people.”

After the preparations have been made by the two disciples in the evening all of the disciples along with Jesus gather to celebrate the Passover meal. If the disciples thought that this would be just like every other Passover meal they had ever celebrated Jesus makes very clear right at the beginning that this meal is going to be different. In Mark 14 we read: (Mark 14:17-21)

When it was evening, Jesus came with the twelve. [18] And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." [19] They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, "Surely, not I?" [20] He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. [21] For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born."

At this point the betrayer is not identified. The disciples are left looking around the table at each other and wondering who was capable of doing such a thing. In part possibly Judas is not identified because the words of Jesus prepare for the events of the rest of the evening in which all of the disciples will fail in their loyalty to him. Judas may be the only one to betray him, but Peter would deny he knew him, and Jesus would be abandoned by all of the rest of them.

It is in this context where Jesus was very conscious of what lay ahead of him both in terms of his own suffering and death and the failures of even those who were closest to him that Jesus again made clear that this was no ordinary Passover meal that he and his disciples were celebrating together. Mark again says (Mark 14:22-25)

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." [23] Then he took a cup, and

after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. [24] He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. [25] Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

We could take the whole of our six weeks of Lenten reflections thinking about what Jesus meant as he shared this bread and cup of wine with his disciples that night and how down through the centuries that meal has been re-enacted and re-interpreted by Christian men and women. At this point, though, let me just highlight again for us who it is with whom he shares this meal. He had already warned them that one of them would betray him. As we shall see next week immediately following the meal he talks about how all of them would desert him and of how Peter would deny him. Yet it is with these very people on whom he knew he could not depend that he shares this meal. Whether or not they appreciated what he was saying or doing that night our anthem last Sunday reminded us of what this meal means to us when it said, "We know we are not worthy, but still He will forgive, for he died that all of us might live. Come, break the bread, come take the cup. Receive the promise of God's great love." (*A Communion Meditation with words by Nancy Price and Don Besig and Music by Don Besig, Harold Flammer Music © 1991, 1992.*)

Our hope in the promise of God's great love is found when we remember who it was with whom Jesus first celebrated this meal. If Jesus could love them enough to share these words and actions with them as the symbol of God's love for them then surely each of us despite our failures and our sin can know that he would want to share God's love and God's forgiveness with us.

Mark tells us that Jesus and the disciples concluded the meal in the traditional way as he says: (Mark 14:26) "When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." The hymn was probably some of what were

known as the Hallel psalms found in Psalms 114-118. It was these psalms that traditionally were sung at the end of the Passover meal. As they leave the city of Jerusalem we are not told when Judas leaves the group but Jesus and the other disciples make their way to an area at the foot of the Mount of Olives known as Gethsemane, a hundred yards or so outside the east wall of the city. There Mark tells us (Mark 14:32-42)

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." [33] He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. [34] And he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." [35] And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. [36] He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."

He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? [38] Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." [39] And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. [40] And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. [41] He came a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. [42] Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

Mark makes clear the anguish that Jesus is beginning to feel as he says that he was distressed and agitated, and told his disciples that he was deeply grieved, even to death." Anyone who wants to suggest that because Jesus was the Son of God he could not experience fear or anxiety must face the reality of the humanity of Jesus expressed in these words of Mark. The way in which he throws

himself on the ground instead of standing to pray as was the normal custom highlights the way in which this was no ordinary prayer but an agonized pleading with God.

While Mark and the other Gospel writers frequently refer to Jesus as a man of prayer, this is one of the few times that we hear the content of his prayer. The prayer is remarkable first of all in its way of addressing God. Jesus calls God, “Abba.” This is an Aramaic word which Mark includes even though he was writing in Greek. In Aramaic, “abba” is the familiar or intimate form of “father,” much like the English, “daddy.” As a term for addressing God, it was very unusual but not unique in ancient Judaism. The term suggests that Jesus felt an intimacy with God like that between child and parent. In so many of his parables and his other teachings, of course, it is such an intimate relationship with God that Jesus encourages all his followers to know and to experience.

Jesus prays that this hour might pass from him, and that the cup might be removed. Both seem to be a reference to his impending suffering, torture and death. In this way he is showing not surprisingly that he would prefer not to go through it. Here again we are confronted by the truth of our humanity and the humanity of Jesus. Even Jesus clearly is not God’s robot, moving without question or emotion toward his death on the cross. Jesus struggles with the possibility that he may resist God’s will. His obedience, like all human obedience to God, is not automatic. Yet even as he prays for deliverance we see that he hands himself over to the Abba in whom he trusts as he says, “Yet, not what I want, but what you want.” The older translation is more familiar to most of us probably when it says, “yet not my will, but thy will be done.” The fact that Jesus himself would struggle in this way to do God’s will reminds us that doing God’s will is not always easy. It is not always the thing that is going to win us friends and influence people in our favor. As we struggle ourselves as the followers of Jesus today to do God’s will

we have that blessed assurance that comes from knowing that Jesus who struggled himself is always with us, and that we can always turn to him in prayer. Let us claim that assurance again as we sing stanzas 1 and 2 of Blessed Assurance found at No. 21 in our booklet of favorite hymns.

Closing Hymn “Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine” stanzas 1 and 2

Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for this opportunity to reflect again on those events in the life of our Lord that continue to impact each of our lives as we seek to live as one of his followers. As you strengthened him to do your will, strengthen us as well. As he sought to give assurance of your great love to his disciples through that Last Supper that he shared with them help us not only at the Lord’s Table but at all time to live in the assurance of your great love for us, for we ask these things in his name and for his sake. Amen.