

HOMILY FOR MAUNDY THURSDAY
18 APRIL 2019

I welcome you all to this celebration of the Paschal Triduum on behalf of Fr Abbot and of the monastic community. Thank you for being here with us. These days focus on and celebrate the death and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who as we sang in our entrance antiphon is our salvation, our life and our resurrection, through whom we are saved and made free. Ultimately this is our theme. We all in Christ have to endure our measure of suffering and ultimately our death; certainly this is true of the Ampleforth monastic community, which continues to experience much challenge and change, and certainly it is true for you all in different ways in your lives. But in Christ we too share in his resurrection and we will experience this together in these days. We pray for you all; please pray for us.

In the Mass of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, always a moving celebration of the love which is in the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ and therefore in the heart of God, we commemorate Christ our God as both priest and victim. This is the very reality and the truest nature of this holy Eucharist we celebrate and of the Church.

Both priest and victim. It is the same Christ *who offers* – he does so as a servant full of love as the washing of the feet shows. And it is the same Christ *who is offered*, as bread and wine become his body and blood, his life offered in sacrifice for us, uniting us to himself in this experience and reality of his death and resurrection. This will be our theme throughout these days together.

In the first two readings, from the book of Exodus and from the first letter of St Paul to the Corinthians, the focus was on the sacrifice offered. At the Last Supper Jesus takes bread and wine and he transforms them to be throughout the history of the Church and of the world and for us a memorial of his offering of himself. So he says ‘this is my body which is for you’ and ‘this cup is the new covenant in my blood’. The reading from Exodus links this to the experience of the great Israelite event of salvation, their escape from slavery in Egypt. The blood of the Passover lambs was smeared on the doorposts to save the Israelites from death; the blood of the new covenant in Christ, his own blood, saves us from death. This sacrifice is made anew, present and effective in every celebration of Mass, a victim offered in love for us.

Christ is also the priest. The Gospel reading from St John, the washing of the feet of the disciples makes it clear that this is not a priesthood of power, of manipulation, of self-gratification – all elements which have been so tragically and damagingly to the fore in the abuse crisis – but rather it is a priesthood of self-giving love and of service. St Peter baulks at this, saying ‘You shall never wash my feet’, just another example of the disciples’ failure to understand that Christ the King exercises no earthly sort of rule and that Christ the Priest is going to offer himself, the humble servant of the world’s redemption.

Still despite their obvious failings, their misunderstandings, their terrible lack of will and courage, Jesus had a plan for these hapless disciples of his. He ordained them that night in the upper room to offer the sacrifice of the new covenant in himself and for them to be in him at the humble service of the world. His words of ordination in our second reading were these: ‘do this as a memorial of me’ and in the gospel the words of ordination were: ‘Do you understand what I have done to you?’ and ‘I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you’. In other words in St John’s gospel it is stated this way: ‘Love one another as I have loved you’. And how has he loved us? Even unto the death of the Cross.

There is a little phrase that goes thus in the account of the washing of the feet and the discussion between Jesus and Peter; it is this: ‘If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me’. Other translations are ‘you can have no part in me’ or ‘no share with me’. I think this phrase is maybe more significant than it looks. We cannot lay hold of the salvation which Christ offers nor can we bring to others the love which is only to be found in him, unless we are one Body with him, part of him, sharing in him. What he gives us, we are to give to others.

Our gospel reading today came from John chapter 13; the passion narrative in John does not begin until chapter 18, which is where tomorrow’s gospel will take up. The four chapters in John from 14 to 17 are called the ‘farewell discourses’ and they are represented as taking place at the Last Supper, quite a long sermon, about eight pages in a Bible. The Church reads these in the latter half of Eastertide, but they provide useful lectio too for *this* evening. They focus on what it means for a Christian to be ‘in Christ’ to have a part or share in him, or to use a phrase otherwise much beloved of St John, ‘to dwell in him’

The final chapter of these farewell discourses is known as the ‘high priestly prayer’ and its final words seem to sum up to me the purpose of Christ, priest and victim:

Father, Upright One,
the world has not known you,
but I have known you,
and these have known
that you have sent me.
I have made your name known to them
and will continue to make it known,
so that the love with which you loved me may be in them,
and so that I may be in them.