

*Sermon preached by Revd Ross Fishburn  
St Paul's Canterbury  
Maundy Thursday  
Thursday 14 April 2022*

*And Jesus said, "Do you know what I have done to you? ... I have set you an example..."* Jn 13: 12, 15

We have just heard two accounts of Jesus last supper with his disciples. The two accounts appear to differ significantly; they have different focuses of attention, they record different details. One has a focus on the supper as symbolic meal; the other as the scene for one of Jesus signs, as he washes feet. Yet these two very different narratives, and the traditions they embody are actually deeply similar in what they preserve as reminders, and as signs, in what they proclaim to the church about the place and action of God in its midst.

Paul gives us the tradition that he says was handed on to him (because he wasn't at the supper, obviously), and it is this tradition about the supper which is also enshrined and slightly elaborated in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. This tradition of the Last Supper shows us Jesus celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples, and giving new meaning and a new point of reference to two elements of an already symbolic meal. When breaking bread, Jesus said *"This is my body, that is for you."* (The gospels will elaborate the words into the form we recall week by week) When taking the symbolic cup after the meal, he said *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood."* He takes symbols from Passover, symbols of the Exodus of the people from slavery in Egypt, symbols which were part of the saving remembrance of the people, the yearly remembrance around which they shaped their lives as God's people, and he gives them a new point of reference, and a changed meaning. Now they will point to the giving of his body, and its brokenness,

the shedding of his blood. In commanding that his disciples do this in remembrance of him, he shifts the focus of the Passover rite, and gives it a new point of reference. Henceforth it will be anchored in the **new** Exodus which he is about to accomplish, to which he was looking forward, an exodus in which his body would be broken and his blood shed, but which would be the key to a new covenant with God.

*"Do you know what I have done to you?"* Jesus changes the fundamental symbol of their religious life; he gives it a new basis, a new point of reference. Now the meal will remember **his** offering, **his** exodus. When the bread and cup are taken now, in the remembering it will be **this** which becomes present as saving memory (as for the Passover, the Exodus is recalled and made present).

In remembering this narrative, Paul speaks of the fundamental reality at the heart of this remembering with bread and cup: *it proclaims the Lord's death until he comes*. He harks back to this for the instruction of one of the communities for which he has apostolic responsibility. This church at Corinth has been getting in a muddle about the eucharistic meal, and getting the focus wrong. And the church down the ages has continued to get in a muddle about this meal and what it does. Over the centuries it has tended to focus more on the bread and the wine itself, as the means and the vehicles by which Jesus is once more present to us as our saviour and our gracious host. It has made the **elements** the focus of attention, and even of adoration. In making **that** the focus, it has given power to priests as custodians of the mysteries, and thereby separated them off as the ones who can handle the sacred things. And all sorts of elaborate ceremonies and practices have grown up around treating the bread and the wine as sacred objects.

*"Do you know what I have done to you?"* Asks the Lord. It wasn't to give a set of sacred objects to be venerated, but **to give us a**

**meal**, in which there were signs, a meal where through the remembering, we found again this fundamental reference point in Christian life, **the death of Jesus as offering and gift** which feeds and sustains us, which leads us into God's freedom.

Paul goes on in this section of his letter to speak of the need to discern the Body, when we come to the eucharistic meal. Now much is written about this, but suffice it to say that it is a deliberately ambiguous use of the word. As he speaks it doesn't just mean the Body of Christ given in the eucharist ( what can so easily be a sacred thing to us); it is as much or more the Body of Christ which is the community which gathers for the meal, the community which remembers and is fed. ***Discerning the body*** means attending to the Lord who is present in the midst of the assembly, in those gathered to remember, as much as he is in the bread and the wine.

Which brings me to John's account and the other symbol: feet. You see John is actually making a very similar point to Paul in recalling the Last Supper. The focus of it all is **feet**: tired and probably smelly feet which need washing. John tells the story of a shift of focus, which parallels Paul's account. Instead of having a nice cozy meal in which they will have good fellowship with their teacher, and have edifying discourse, and learn mind expanding things, and have mysteries opened for them, the disciples find Jesus at their feet rather than in the teacher's seat. They find him taking the servant role, and their minds are blown by the change. But that's what John shows as the focus of this meal: **a mind blowing change of focus**, which is given to them as a sign for their ongoing life.

*"Do you know what I have done to you? I have given you an example.* This is a sign in John's account, and signs are significant for him. Signs reveal the nature of God, and how God is working through Jesus. This is a sign, because it shows the new place of God, not separated off from people, but in the midst of the

community, there to be known and served in the other members of the community, in the neighbour.

No longer is God so distant that the only permitted approach is with fear and trembling, the only relationship one of awe. In Jesus, **God has taken a new place**, at the disciples' feet, and raising them to table with him as honoured guests, they have a new place too, as those who are no longer servants but friends. We are given feet as a sign, and Jesus washing feet, to remind us as well as John's community of faith that following Jesus is about more than just edifying discourse, or glorious liturgy which leads us into the mysteries of God. It's about flesh and blood realities, about real people who may well have smelly feet, and be difficult to love and serve, and perhaps are opaque as symbols and vehicles of God's presence and action.

That is what both Paul and John are doing as they remember this last supper of Jesus. God is found in an unexpected place, in the flesh and blood reality of the community. It is **in the community** which gathers to remember and to look forward in hope, **in the eating and the drinking**, and **in the gathering and the communing**, **and in the loving and caring** given to each and to all; it is in all of these aspects of our common life and hope that we remember and recall Jesus, and find him present again to save and renew.