

The Barton-upon-Humber group of parishes.

Maundy Thursday 2020

Readings for the Eucharist:

Exodus 12.1–4, (5–10), 11–14, 1 Corinthians 11.23–26, John 13.1–17, 31b–35

'Maundy' is an English mangling of the Latin '*mandatum*' 'commandment' taken from Jesus' words in John '*I give you a new commandment, love one another as I have loved you*'.

The Maundy Thursday readings are astonishingly rich. Exodus describes the origins of the Jewish Passover, which is being celebrated at this time., and we can see how elements of the Passover story are echoed in Paul's account of the institution of the Eucharist – the earliest we have, of course, much earlier than those in the Gospels – and also in John's Last Supper account, including the teaching which takes place in it.

In John, the actual supper gets little mention, and attention is drawn to a different aspect of God's self-giving through the foot-washing. It echoes words in the earliest known Christian hymn, in Paul's letter to the Church at Philippi, the Christ who '*emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.*' And hanging over it all is that sense of foreboding as betrayal is announced and Judas departs, accompanied by John's comment, '*It was night.*' The forces of darkness are gathering even as the light shines in the Upper Room.

The Great Three Days of the Christian year, Maundy Thursday to Easter Day are topped and tailed by John's story of the upper room. Here, tonight, the darkness starts to settle and the disciples become increasingly apprehensive. Just to drive it home, the Eucharistic prayer for tonight includes the words '*who in this night that he was betrayed.*' On Sunday we return to the same room, its door locked, the disciples huddled in fear, uncertain of the witness of the women, a fearfulness only dispelled by Jesus' appearance and bestowing of the Holy Spirit. But that is three days distant, and before then the forces of the night will seem to hold sway.

These are the great themes of tonight – the God who comes to save, the God who gives himself and the God who serves. They sit ill with those nightmare images of the divine as irritable, wrathful and quick to condemn. As we begin our keeping of these days, through these readings and perhaps through the poems on the following pages, we may be challenged to think again about what sort of God we need and long for.

It Seemed the Better Way

Leonard Cohen (1934-2016) was a noted Canadian poet, songwriter and novelist who explored many different and difficult themes, including those of religion, doubt and death. A practising orthodox Jew, he was fascinated by the person of Jesus and a student of Zen Buddhism.

Seemed the better way
When first I heard him speak
Now it's much too late
To turn the other cheek

Sounded like the truth
Seemed the better way
Sounded like the truth
But it's not the truth today

I wonder what it was
I wonder what it meant
First he touched on love
Then he touched on death

Sounded like the truth
Seemed the better way
Sounded like the truth
But it's not the truth today

I better hold my tongue
I better take my place
Lift this glass of blood
Try to say the grace

Seemed the better way
When first I heard him speak
But now...

Released as his 'Poem for Easter' in 2003 (in a slightly different form where it explicitly referenced 'blessed are the meek'), Cohen is inhabiting the world of doubt and fear within the mind of a disciple present at the Last Supper. As they gather in the upper room, uncertain of what the future holds, Cohen's words are dark and foreboding. Violence and betrayal are in the air. Is the reference to 'turning the other cheek' a nod towards Peter and his sword? Or is it Judas speaking? Or is it 'the beloved disciple' keeping his innermost fears secret?

As we gather, isolated in our 'upper rooms' this Maundy Thursday, do these words call out any reaction in us? Can we identify with the speaker's emotions and sense of bewilderment or confusion expressed by 'Sounded like the truth, But it's not the truth today' or 'I wonder what it was, I wonder what it meant'?

This is the night for weeping

Peter Abelard (c1079 – 21 April 1142) is best remembered in popular thought for his disastrous love affair with Héloïse d'Argenteuil, but as a teacher of the faith he was considerably ahead of his time – which inevitably brought him into conflict with many senior Church figures of his own day.

He wrote some remarkable poems/hymns. This one is part of a hymn for use on Maundy Thursday and in the small hours of Good Friday. It uses a theme which the early Fathers and Mothers of the Church had developed, that in the story of Easter we see the weight of evil is turned against itself, an idea also found in C.S. Lewis, including 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe'.

This is the night, dear friends, the night for weeping,
when powers of darkness overcome the day,
the night the faithful mourn the weight of evil
whereby our sins the Son of Man betray.

This night the traitor, wolf within the sheepfold,
betrays himself into his victim's will;
the Lamb of God for sacrifice preparing,
sin brings about the cure for sin's own ill.

This night Christ institutes his holy supper,
blest food and drink for heart and soul and mind;
this night injustice joins its hand to treason's,
and buys the ransom-price of humankind.

This night the Lord by slaves shall be arrested,
he who destroys our slavery to sin;
accused of crime, to criminals be given,
that judgement on the righteous Judge begin.

O make us sharers, Saviour, of your Passion,
that we may share your glory that shall be;
let us pass through these three dark nights of sorrow
to Easter's laughter and its liberty.

*'...this night injustice joins its hand to treason's,
and buys the ransom-price of humankind.'*

We are used to explanations of what happens during the Passion of Christ which try to describe exactly how salvation 'works' – some say that humanity deserved God's punishment but that the innocent, Jesus, takes it instead, something which raises as many questions as it answers. Others use sacrificial language, but such language is not part of our everyday toolkit of ideas, and so may be hard for us to relate to.

Abelard works differently, and invites us to see that God turns even our evil intent to a good end and deals, not in logic-chopping but in mystery. Judas the traitor enables God, to set us free and as the mob and frightened Jewish and Roman leaders deny Jesus justice they unwittingly bring in a new hope.

When we reflect on our own tragedies and betrayals, what sort of God do we long for? Does Abelard's belief that God turns even human errors and sin to a good end give us hope? And is paradox – the placing together of apparently incompatible ideas or images to express a hidden truth which somehow encompasses both – a key to encountering the mystery we call God?

Maundy Thursday Collects

God our Father, you have invited
us to share in the supper which
your Son gave to his Church to
proclaim his death until he comes:
may he nourish us by his presence,
and unite us in his love;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you
that in this wonderful sacrament
you have given us the memorial of
your passion: grant us so to
reverence the sacred mysteries of
your body and blood that we may
know within ourselves and show
forth in our lives the fruit of your
redemption, for you are alive and
reign, now and forever.

Lord Jesus Christ,
you have taught us that what we do
for the least of our brothers and sisters
we do also for you:
give us the will to be the servant of others
as you were the servant of all,
and gave up your life and died for us,
but are alive and reign, now and for ever. Amen.