

**SERMON 1**

**Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35**

Reading deathbed quotations can provide information and amusement, bewilderment, and boredom. Seldom, though, do famous last words produce meaning and inspiration.

Such is not the case with Jesus, however. Commonly, Good Friday sermons reflect on Christ's last words from the cross. But his truer deathbed quotations come in the lessons for today's worship.

Okay. What we have before us are "death table" words, but they are the famous last words of our faith and of all creation – words that provide meaning and inspiration, words that give us hope and life, in the deepest sense.

Jesus used his last moments with his inner core of followers to profound effect. He knew he was about to die. He knew they would have trouble going on without him. So he knew he had to leave them with words that would sustain them.

We heard the first of his famous last words in the Epistle reading. "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. ... This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

By following these instructions after he was gone, the disciples could keep Jesus among them – by recollecting, by recalling him to their presence. Through a special act, using common food, he taught them to become what he was, and to perpetuate him within themselves. As they ate what he called his body and his blood, his life itself, they became the love that Jesus was and is. Those who would accept his mission and live into his vision would become the Body of Christ in the world he was leaving behind.

Eat the Body of Christ. Drink the blood of the holy one whose self-sacrifice made you the most special and valuable beings in creation, by making us all worth dying for. Be ever connected with him. Be ever aware of God's presence with you and God's love for you. Do not be afraid to risk living, really living, as the reality of Jesus that is in you gives you courage and strength and comfort in the midst of this often troublesome world of ours. In this spiritual food we gain spiritual and emotional energy to sustain us on our way.

Take the body of Christ. Become the Body of Christ. Become love in unity with all others through the love of Jesus. We are united at the Lord's Table, are we not? At least at the moment of receiving the sacraments alongside our fellow Christians, we are one. We are united with one another in all our intentions and with all our focus

as we recall Jesus among us. We are at total peace with one another and all of humanity in this special, holy moment.

Sometimes it may be only for that moment, as we perhaps stray into negative or judgmental thoughts, noticing something or someone even as we return to our pew. Nevertheless, the action stands for us as the benchmark for what we can become. The loving, peaceful unity of the Lord's Table can become reality in our day-to-day lives. These famous last words of Jesus can transform us. "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. ... This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

The other famous last words of Jesus come to us from St. John's version of the Last Supper. He gives us a more specific understanding of what it means to be the Body of Christ. As the bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus, fills us up, it overflows from us onto others in the form of loving actions.

Jesus got down on the ground before the disciples and washed their dusty feet as a way to lead them into actions of love for others. To be the Body of Christ, he says, reach out with your resources to serve others as I am serving you. "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you." These famous last words in this startling exemplary action tell us what to do as his followers. Remember this, he tell us. Remember me in front of you, serving you, and do the same for others.

On the eve of his death, Jesus did not focus on his need but on the needs of others. The one who was the leader – the focus of all attention, the master – became like a slave to those who by all logic should have served him. In taking the towel and basin to himself, Jesus turned the realities of the world upside down and shook them out so the values of God could pour out on us. He transformed the traditional understanding of power and laid priority on values that rest only in God. In the light of the events of the night before Jesus died, could his closest followers have failed to remember his teachings about caring for the least among us? After he was gone, must they not have connected his washing their feet with his continual reminders about loving our neighbours as much as we love ourselves – about denying ourselves and taking up our own crosses in following him? Did Jesus' famous last words provide meaning and inspiration – giving hope and life, in the deepest sense? The answer bears itself out day by day as we, his followers, remember – as we recall him to presence and face the challenge of becoming the very Body of Christ, loving others as Jesus loved us.

## SERMON 2

Many of us go through the motions of washing each other's feet on this sacred Maundy Thursday but forget to remember and to emphasise that this is a new order, not just a humble act.

**Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; I Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35**

“And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.”

Have you ever heard a verse of scripture as if for the first time? Have you ever noticed a connection that, in many hearings in the past, you had ignored? Did you now hear the stunning juxtaposition contained in this one sentence?

If someone were telling you a story about a person who had been given all power by God – for this is what “all things into his hands” means – if you were introduced to such a person who came directly from God and was about to return to God, would you expect him to put on a towel, an apron?

Think about it. Imagine this scene. You would naturally expect such a person to put on a crown or assume the stance of power; this is what the world has taught us to expect. Why then did the evangelist make the first part dependant on and connected to the second? The second part of the sentence derives from the first: it means that the one person with control of “all things” willingly performs the humblest act of a servant. The connection between the two ought to stun us into silence and awe.

With this one scene vivid before us we tonight leave an insane world behind in order to enter into sanity – utter sanity and peace in the midst of the saddest story in the cosmos. The Lord and Teacher, as he admits that he is, takes on the role of the servant inside an ordinary upper room while the forces of evil are going mad outside; men who are drunk with their own power and cleverness are plotting to kill him, as he quietly takes off his robe, puts on a towel, and kneels before his students and friends. This is a situation that only God would have dreamed up. But Jesus says that by this act he is teaching us to dream in the same manner. Even though the servant cannot rise higher than the master, as the people believed in a world that kept everyone in his and her place, the master here becomes the servant. Peter is scandalized. “You will never wash my feet,” he tells Jesus. And if the writer of that day possessed this particular technology, he would have italicized the word “my.” “Not *my* feet, Lord.”

But Jesus reprimands him. He is really saying to Peter:

“Forget the old ways of thinking and doing, Peter. Forget the structures that keep the poor, poor, and the slaves in a permanent underclass from which they cannot escape. Forget what you have been taught, and do as I do. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

Many of us go through the motions of washing each other’s feet on this sacred Maundy Thursday but forget to remember and to emphasize that this is a new order, not just a humble act. All the passages we read tonight speak of a drastic change to the status quo. Think for a moment about that world of the first century. Rome controlled her subjects with an iron hand. Compassion, love, and non-violence had no place in such a world. Slaves were not considered human beings; the emperor had unquestioned power; the father in the household, the *pater familias*, could dictate the life or death of his own children; women were not citizens; and humility was not a virtue but a weakness to be despised. In Israel, an occupied land, the higher clergy, Annas and Caiaphas in this instance, controlled the people by collaborating with the Roman powers. Caiaphas admits it when he says during these secret machinations against Jesus, “It is better that one man should die for the people.” That meant that he knew how to appease Rome. Into this world comes the Son of God, and by donning a towel and kneeling before his friends to wash their feet, he declares that in God’s eyes everything is different from what Rome and the clergy declare as the order of things. Power is relinquished willingly because love is stronger than power. What a revolutionary concept! It was unthinkable in that first century; it is scandalous even in our time, except for those who truly understand the good news of God in Christ.

Robert Browning wrote a poem about a fictitious Arabic doctor, who visited Israel some years after the resurrection. This physician comes across Lazarus and hears his own story of being brought back from the dead. He realizes that Lazarus’ way of seeing the world is totally different from that of other people. The physician relates this encounter to his friend Abib when he returns home. He tries hard to remain skeptical, but he keeps returning to what Lazarus revealed to him. He tells his friend, “If this indeed happened, think of the implications.”

Listen to the last verse of this poem by Robert Browning, “An Epistle”:

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?  
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too –  
So, through the thunder comes a human voice  
Saying, “O heart I made, a heart beats here!  
Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!  
Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of mine,  
But love I gave thee, with myself to love,  
And thou must love me who have died for thee!

### SERMON 3

**Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; I Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35**

The ancient designation of this day, this night, is “Maundy,” a form of the word “mandate.” And what is a mandate? It is a command, a demand, an order, an administrative determination, a legal authority, something required. It is mandatory, rather than optional. No choice.

So, what is our mandate on this day? To love one another.

The story of this day, this night, includes dinner with friends, some farewell speeches, the washing of feet, entreaties to wakefulness, sleep, betrayal, violence, absence. It is a night of sweetness and of division, of coming together and ripping apart. The stories we most often associate with this day, this night, and which we remember most fondly, are the stories of a last supper, of Jesus instructing his disciples to “remember me,” of Jesus washing his followers’ feet.

Maundy Thursday is generally regarded as the occasion for the institution of the Eucharist, what some call Holy Communion, to commemorate Jesus’ last meal. Numerous congregations will have a ceremonial washing of feet.

But do you remember, too, the entreaty of Jesus to “watch with me for a little while,” when his disciples wanted to sleep? Loneliness. Abandonment. The quiet of a slumbering night. Do you remember the betrayal of Judas, when he identified his lord to the soldiers? Treachery. Anger. The other disciples responded with horror. One disciple cut off a soldier’s ear before Jesus stopped him. Finally, Jesus was hauled away by the soldiers, the disciples were left alone in shock and grief, Peter stumbled around, lost, denying he even knew Jesus, and the cock crowed. Once. Twice. Three times. The dawning of a new and terrible day when people would be put to death.

This is not a time to be sentimental. It is not a time for pleasant reminiscing. There is nothing charming about this part of our Christian story. Indeed, it has all the elements of a modern crime drama of the worst kind.

In the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, we read of Jesus and the meal of bread and wine. Many details are missing from this story. Who prepared the meal? What else did they have to eat? Was anyone else in attendance? These gospel writers have distilled it down to its essence: It was a final meal of bread and wine during which Jesus instructed his followers to share these elements, to remember him in doing so, and to love one another.

In John's gospel we get a different take on things, a different emphasis, with the story of the foot washing. John tells of a meal, too, but his focus is more on the show and tell: "this is what it looks like when you love one another."

When we mark Maundy Thursday, we mark the beginning of the end, in a sense. It is the time when Jesus bid farewell to his followers on this earth and gave them final instructions for carrying on in his absence. It was a last opportunity for Jesus to tell them his message and show them what he meant: Love one another; do it like this.

But there is another aspect of the story that we must remember, and we need to tell if we are to be honest, and if we are to fully appreciate the events of Good Friday and the triumph of Easter Sunday. Yes, this occasion commemorates the institution of the Lord's Supper. Yes, Jesus washed his disciples' feet.

But we must give consideration, too, to the brokenness of these events.

When we come together Sunday after Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist and proclaim Jesus' words to "do this in remembrance of me," what do we do next?

We break the bread.

Breaking bread is a practice steeped in tradition, going back deep into Jewish history. It is also a practical action prior to sharing a meal. Breaking bread is mentioned throughout scripture in connection with ordinary meals, ritual meals and the miracle meals of Jesus, such as the feeding of the 5,000 chronicled in John's gospel. This breaking of the bread is an important part of the story as the synoptic gospels tell it, yet is absent from the Gospel of John, which we read this day. Why?

For Matthew, Mark and Luke, the synoptics, Jesus shared the Passover meal with his disciples. Jesus ate the Passover meal, ate the bread. For John, on the other hand, Jesus was the Passover meal, the Passover sacrifice, the Paschal Lamb of God who is sacrificed for us. Jesus was present in the actual bread. Jesus was the bread. It was Jesus who would be betrayed and killed and shed the ritual blood that would redeem the people before God.

Jesus was the Passover sacrifice.

And so when we come together for the Eucharist, to commemorate the Lord's Supper, the Last Supper, and we break that bread, it is much more than simply breaking bread that we may share it out among the gathered community. It is breaking Jesus all over again, that he may be the ritual sacrifice for us.

We break the bread. We break the Body. We break his body, as we have broken our promises, our commitments, our relationships, our community. All. Over. Again.

This is a pivotal point of the Eucharist, a pivotal point of our Maundy Thursday story, when Jesus is taken whole and consecrated to God, and then broken on the altar of our sins.

In the record of the synoptic gospels, Jesus and the disciples are nourished, body and soul, in the breaking of bread and the sharing of a meal, much as we commemorate in our Eucharist.

In John's gospel, there is a different kind of breaking, a different sort of nourishment. For John, Jesus is the sacrificial figure, but the emphasis here is not on the Eucharist. So that when Jesus washes feet, he is offering nourishment of a different sort. When he breaks himself, lowers himself, to take on water bowl and towel and perform this lowly act of comfort, he is giving life to the words: "Do this in remembrance of me."

The love of Jesus, the love of God, the love of neighbor, is more than breaking bread in church. It is emptying oneself in love and modesty to be filled with the spirit of God in service to our neighbors.

John's relation of the story of this day, this night, has a message for us beyond the breaking of bread, even beyond the breaking of the Body of Christ, which we do over and over again in our lives and in our Eucharistic worship.

John's message is this: Remember me. Love one another. And this is how you do it.

"Love one another" is our mandate for this day. As we break the Body of Jesus once again in the act of breaking bread, may we remember his command to love one another, and better yet, his example given us in the Gospel of John, to take care of one another – in remembrance of our Lord.