

Tonight, is undoubtedly the strangest Maundy Thursday in any of our lifetimes.

Tonight, we gather to remember Jesus on the night before he died. We remember the Last Supper. We hear from John how before the meal, Jesus washed the feet of his followers, then commanded them to do the same.

Usually we wash each other's feet on this night as a reminder of Jesus' ministry of servanthood, and his command that we follow in his footsteps. But not this year. This year we will have to settle for remembering Jesus' command to love and serve one another, without physically being able to wash feet.

Tonight, we remember the first celebration of the Holy Eucharist. We hear from Paul the very familiar words, also repeated in Matthew, Mark and Luke, about Jesus taking the Jewish Passover meal and giving it new meaning. This is my Body. This is my Blood.

Usually we all come to the altar in person and partake physically of this sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood. But not this year. This year we will still celebrate this meal. But most of us will have to partake spiritually in lieu of partaking physically.

A little later, we will remember Jesus leaving the Upper Room where he celebrated the Last Supper. And we will hear him praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We will hear his words: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."¹

Jesus shares the sacramental cup of his Blood in the first Eucharist. And a few hours later he is asking if he can be spared drinking from the cup of his Passion, the cup of his suffering and death. Nevertheless, he responds in faith to God, "Not what I want, but what you want."

And yet, there is a tiny transition between the Upper Room and the Garden of Gethsemane. There is a tiny transition between the Cup of the New Covenant shared with his disciples in the Eucharist, and the Cup of the Passion which Jesus will drink alone.

And we find that tiny transition in Mark's version of the Passion. Mark says, "When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."²

The hymn. Not A hymn, but THE hymn.

What is Mark talking about? What hymn? Probably a traditional Passover Psalm, Psalm 116. We just read it a few moments ago.

¹ Mt 26:39

² Mk 14:26

Psalm 116 is a powerful song of thanksgiving for what God has done in the past. It begins,

*I love the Lord,
because he has heard the voice of my supplication, *
because he has inclined his ear to me
whenever I called upon him.*

This Psalm looks back with thankfulness for God's loving deeds in the past. In the context of the Jewish Passover meal, God's love saved his people from death and slavery. The angel of death passed over their houses, and the next day they were brought out of Egypt into freedom and new life.

In fact we skipped a few verses of the psalm tonight. But those skipped verses poetically remember how God saved his people from death:

*[2 The cords of death entangled me;
the grip of the grave took hold of me; *
I came to grief and sorrow.*

*[7 You have rescued my life from death, *
my eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling.*

*[8 I will walk in the presence of the Lord *
in the land of the living.*

How poignant it is in the context of Maundy Thursday to think of Jesus singing such a hymn. A hymn of deliverance from death, even though his impending death is staring him in the face. A hymn of love and trust and thanksgiving to God, even in the face of the cross which he will embrace the very next day.

We picked up with the Psalmist's response, which points at Jesus' response:

*10 How shall I repay the Lord *
for all the good things he has done for me?*

*11 I will lift up the cup of salvation *
and call upon the Name of the Lord.*

That night Jesus lifted up the cup of thanksgiving, the cup of salvation, even as he was also praying that the cup of suffering would pass him by.

Yet Jesus responds as he always does, with faith and trust in his Father. His perfect obedience, his perfect trust, will be on display as he endures being arrested and beaten and spit upon. His faithfulness will be made known as he picks up his cross and carries it to the place of his crucifixion.

As he lifts up the cup of thanksgiving on Maundy Thursday night, he will also be lifted up on the cross and will drink the full cup of suffering on Good Friday.

He will live out in agonizing detail the faithfulness expressed by the Psalmist:

*15 I will offer you the sacrifice of thanksgiving *
and call upon the Name of the Lord.
16 I will fulfill my vows to the Lord *
in the presence of all his people...*

Tonight, we gather in thanksgiving for what Jesus has done. We can't wash each other's feet. We can't physically distribute communion. But we are nevertheless engaging together in Eucharist, the word that means Thanksgiving. We will lift up the cup of his sacramental blood shed for us, remembering Jesus' sacrifice, proclaiming his death, and looking forward to his resurrection, and our resurrection.

We prayed on Palm Sunday,

"Assist us mercifully with your help, O Lord God of our salvation, that we may enter with joy upon the contemplation of those mighty acts, whereby you have given us life and immortality..."³

That's what we're continuing to do tonight--to contemplate the Passion--to see in the cup of Jesus' suffering and the cup of Eucharistic thanksgiving the source of our salvation.

Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.
Therefore, let us keep the feast.

Let us lift up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord.

³ BCP p. 270