

Thursday 29th March 2018
Maundy Thursday

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Exodus 12.1-4, 11-14
NT: I Corinthians 11.23-26
G: John 13.1-7, 31b-35

When you summarize the events of your life, I wonder what moments you pick out. I found myself on Tuesday sharing some moments from the past with a new acquaintance, and I realised how much those moments had changed me. They weren't particularly good memories, but all of our histories become part of our own story today, because they make us who we are. Even so, most of us have a single moment, or a sequence of events, which we would label as 'transformative'. We often hear people talking about events which 'changed their lives', but in our Christian lives there is transformation going on all the time: real transformation of ourselves, and of the world around us.

Maundy Thursday, the day when we commemorate the institution of the Eucharist, is all about transformation. On the night before he died, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and said, "This is my body." He took the wine, gave thanks and said, "This is my blood." Exactly what happens to the bread and the wine at the Eucharist is a matter for personal reflection and understanding. For those who have tried to grapple with this question over the centuries, there are no clear answers. What we do know, and what we can tell from our second reading this evening, written some years before even the Gospels were written, is that the events and words of the Last Supper made their way into Christian worship very shortly after Jesus' death. He did not say, 'Let's pretend that this is my body' or 'Figuratively speaking this is my body,' only "This is my body." Defining what these words mean is perhaps beyond our human understanding, and the Church of England is wise in its caution: rather than precise definition, the Church teaches only that in some way Christ is truly present in the bread and the wine.

In some way therefore we are present tonight as at every Eucharist at a transformation, a transformation of the simple elements of bread and wine into a spiritual meal where we believe Christ to be present. That transformation occurs by the action of the Holy Spirit when the people of God

assemble to celebrate the Eucharist, and to recall, in the manner that Jesus himself commanded, his death and resurrection. And if Jesus is present in some form of objective way, then he must too be present in a subjective way if we are to receive the full benefits of the transformation of the bread and the wine. For what the Eucharist enables is a transformation of ourselves.

When we gather to celebrate the Eucharist we are making a holy meal not just by saying the right words, but in the community we make to enable that celebration. Every assembly of the people of God represents an opening up of ourselves to God and to each other: we confess our sinfulness, we hear and study together the word of God as we find it in the scriptures, we pray together, and at the peace we are reconciled to each other before we receive communion. What we begin to do in the Eucharist is what we heard in our Gospel this evening: that at the Last Supper Jesus removed his outer garment, bent down, and washed the feet of his disciples. For in washing the disciples' feet, Jesus was opening himself up to them, and giving himself, sacrificing something of himself for the benefit of those around him.

That sacrifice is what we are called to do in the Eucharist and in our lives. The Gospel of John, unlike the other Gospels, does not focus on the meal in his account of Maundy Thursday, but only on the washing of feet – but really they are all part of the same action. We may not literally do it at every Eucharist, at every assembly of the people of God, but in forming our Eucharistic community, in opening ourselves to God and to each other, we are washing each other's feet. The sacrifice which we ourselves make to join the assembly of the people of God both prefigures and reflects the sacrifice of Jesus to which the action on the altar bears witness.

It is in that dual action of the washing of feet and the offering of the bread and the wine that we find Christ amongst us at every Eucharist. And through the presence of Christ – for where love and sacrifice are, there God is – we find that we ourselves are transformed. We are transformed from independent units who breathe and eat and exist on our own, into something bigger, something where

we are a part of each other; and what we share together we share also with Christ. The transformation which we bring about in our celebration of the Eucharist, and which the action of the Eucharist brings about in us, is into a community founded in Christ. It is a community which is rooted in the love of God, and where we can experience most nearly the presence of God.

We witness two transformations tonight: the bread and the wine is transformed into something most holy, and we are transformed as well into something holy, something consecrated to the service and to the glory of him who created us, who was born and died for us, and who calls all of us to be with him. In both of these real transformations the substance itself changes into something new and something different.

The first three Gospels tell us how on this night Jesus took the bread and the wine and proclaimed them to be his body and his blood, and commanded that we should do this in remembrance of him. The Gospel of John's account which we have heard put that commandment again, but in different words:

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Fr Crispin Pailing