

Maundy Thursday 2017

Jn.13:1-17; 31b-5

It is very striking that on this night when we recall the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist, we read from the Gospel that doesn't say much about either. All the other Gospels, and St. Paul, record Jesus taking the bread and wine, speaking of them in terms of his own body and blood, and commanding the disciples to 'do this in memory of me'. St. John doesn't. Indeed, there has been debate about whether St. John in fact represents what might be called an anti-sacramental trend in early Christianity – one which wasn't fussed about apostles and baptisms and eucharists, all the externals of the Christian life, and which focussed instead on the inner life and spiritual union with God.

So why choose this Gospel for tonight then? Well, for one thing although there has been debate about John's view of the sacraments, most readers have in the end decided that he actually does take them very seriously indeed. He writes those great chapters on Jesus as the bread of life and as the true Vine – it's hard to believe those weren't intended as reflections on the Eucharist, and indeed the Church has always understood them to be such. He's not anti-sacramental. What he is, though, is determined to make us think about the heart of the matter – about what, in this instance, 'do this in remembrance of me' might really mean. One good way into thinking about John 13, the Gospel we've just heard, is to hear it as trying to answer the question, 'what is *the point* of celebrating the eucharist?'

Now, there is a certain style of being Christian – which is my style, my deeply valued and cherished style – which says, 'it's obvious what the point is.' Come to the eucharist because this is where, above all, Jesus comes to us. Come to the eucharist so that he may live in us, and we in Him. Come to the eucharist so that all the darkness and coldness of our lives may be touched by grace. All of that is true – vitally, wonderfully true – but there is a danger. The danger is that we focus, almost exclusively, on what is happening at that most personal, intimate spiritual level – the encounter between me and Jesus. The point of reading St. John tonight is that he shows, with beautiful clarity, that is to at best a very one-sided way of thinking. The Eucharist is just as much about – perhaps even more about – making a certain kind of community. A community of foot-washers.

That doesn't at all contradict all the personal emphasis, all the talk about meeting Jesus in bread and wine. Who are you meeting in bread and wine? One who broke himself, who poured himself out in love for the world. If you meet this Person in the eucharist, if you truly share his life, then you too will begin to break yourself, to pour yourself out. And this is a mysterious, spiritual reality, yes – but a mysterious, spiritual reality which instantly takes outward and visible form. You've only really had communion if your life begins to look like communion – if you become a person poured out for others, loving them, serving them in visible, flesh and blood ways. Jesus washed the feet of the disciples to show them what his death would make of them: people who loved each other, people who served each other. In Christianity, there is no division at all between the most intimate spiritual union with God, and the most practical care for each other. Love – real, prosaic, footwashing love - is simply what faith looks like.

So it is very salutary to have this reading tonight. We are very good – as individuals and as a Church – about drifting away from John's point. So, for example, I spend a lot of time worrying about how to present the faith well – how to preach, how to engage people's minds and help them ask questions and find answers, how to make sure the services speak of the glory and mystery of God. We all worry about how to keep the whole show on the road: getting people to give properly, enthusing volunteers, getting out and about in the community. And all those things are great. They're essential, and do them well takes a lot of effort and focus and time. And unfortunately, that means that doing them can easily become a way in which we forget something even more basic: is the church we're trying so hard to run actually *being* the church? Is the community all this energy and love gets poured into actually doing what it is meant to do, or has all the effort of keeping it going made us forget why it should go in the first place? In the next three days, there is going to be a lot of religion done in this place, a lot of prayer, a lot of spirituality. We have St. John tonight – what people sometimes call the spiritual, mystical Gospel – to remind us to seek the prosaic, secular point.

So, for instance, I remember once years ago chatting to the head-teacher of a local primary school where I used to take assemblies. She mentioned that two little boys were being bullied, and that part of the reason was that they smelled. They smelled because their clothes weren't clean, and it soon became clear that the clothes weren't clean because the washing machine at home was broken. Mum was poor. She'd been dumped by a useless man, and she was sunk in depression. A trip to the laundrette was too much to face. Could the church do anything, the head wondered?

I would like to tell you that we sorted it out wonderfully: not just that a priest popped round for a cup of tea but that the electrician in our congregation looked at the washing machine. When he couldn't fix it, we just had a quiet word with ten people and a new machine appeared. Meanwhile, the clothes had been all been washed anyway in various Christian homes, and someone had bought some hot meals to the family, and people had started trying to befriend the woman. I would like to tell you that, but I can't because it didn't happen. We were so busy running the church – a very busy, successful church - that in the end, that time, we forgot why there *is* a church. We forgot that the point is to be Christ's body: to make his love flesh and blood – to make it real: prosaic, non-spiritual, washing-machine-fixing real. We had all the gifts, all the resources, even all the good will – and yet somehow we just let the moment pass. Because our eyes were everywhere but where John and Jesus would have them be – on the person needing help, there and then.

So it is a very simple message tonight. The point of the eucharist, the reason Jesus gives himself to us, is to make a church – to make a community where people get loved, where we pour ourselves out for each other. Churches should be places of utter practicality: where no-one is left to be lonely, where nobody goes hungry, where we share – spiritually, emotionally, and quite simply, materially. We are to be places where no-one gets left behind: where people know they will find help, and will need to give help. One reason society has by and large turned away from us is because we have not, on the whole, been like that. We think it's about what time church is at, or what songs we sing, or our views on sex – it's not. Those things have some importance, but far, far more basic is the question: do we love? Not do we *say* we love, not are we bright, shiny happy people, but do we *really* love? . In this church, do the washing machines get fixed, the broken hearted gently nursed? A community known for that would not have to worry about whether it would make new disciples – except, perhaps, whether it would be able to fit everyone in. Let's make that our vision.