

Maundy Thursday 2013

Do this in Remembrance of Me

Readings:

Exodus 12:1-4(5-10)11-14

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17,31b-35

+ *In Nomine*

During the last two weeks, the scripture reading set for Morning Prayer in the Divine Office is that complex text, written by a theologically literate Jew – the Letter to the Hebrews. In it, the writer draws on the Jewish religious law relating to priesthood and sacrifice to show how Jesus is both priest and victim through the New Covenant forged through His death on the cross.

Jesus – priest and victim is at the heart of our celebration tonight. This service is traditionally called the Mass of the Last Supper and it is the first part of the most significant feast of the Christian calendar. It is the beginning of what is called the Easter Triduum – three days in which we remember Jesus' sacrificial love poured out for us on the Cross and His glorious resurrection from the dead. Tonight is part of an ongoing liturgy which does not end until Easter Day.

On the night before He died, Jesus gave his friends – and all of us who follow Him – the most precious gift of all – the gift of His Presence in bread and wine each time we gather together to do what he commanded.

But to understand this gift more fully we need to return to its Jewish roots. In Exodus we hear how God's chosen people were delivered by God from slavery in Egypt. This was accomplished by the sacrifice of the 'paschal lambs' and the sprinkling of their blood on the lintels as a sign that the people

were to be spared. The Passover was and still is celebrated annually by Jewish people to remember God's deliverance from oppression. Later, the High Priests of the Jerusalem Temple offered animal sacrifices to God in atonement for the sin of the people. Like the Passover, this was an ordinance required by God under the Law given to Moses and the covenant He made with His people in the desert. A great number of priests over many years spilt the blood of bulls and goats as offerings of atonement to God.

Though these sacrifices were imperfect, they prefigured that perfect sacrifice offered by Jesus who *gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*. On the 'holy of holies' of the cross, Jesus, who is both true God and true priest, shed not the blood of bulls and goats but his own blood – poured out for the salvation of all.

A fifth century bishop, St Fulgentius of Ruspe explains it this way:

He it is then who showed forth in himself alone all that he knew to be necessary to achieve our redemption – he who at the same time is both priest and sacrifice, God and temple: the priest through whom we are reconciled, the sacrifice by which we are reconciled, the temple in which we are reconciled, the God to whom we are reconciled.

This is the living power of the Cross. But why am I speaking of the Cross tonight?

At the last supper, Jesus took the most simple of everyday staples – bread and wine – and transformed them forever. He wanted to leave a means by which His sacrifice of love on the Cross could be not simply remembered but renewed for all God's people until He comes in glory at the end time. At the end of St Matthew's Gospel Jesus promised that he would be with us to the end of the age. And He is – in this most Holy Sacrament of the altar.

When Jesus took bread and wine and said these simple words *this is my body broken for you* and *this is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins* he wasn't enacting a cosy little ritual for his friends who shared this last meal with him. He was leaving them with the assurance of His continued presence and the assurance that through the giving of His life, sin is cancelled and that *we are reconciled to God by the death of His Son*. Jesus is both priest and victim and in this Holy Sacrament we celebrate His continued Real Presence and rejoice in the sacrifice of His life poured out for us through which we have remission of our sins. Remember Jesus' words in St John's Gospel:

When I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself

He did just this when he was lifted up on the Cross on Good Friday. And at the Consecration – the most sacred part of the Eucharist, the priest lifts up the Host and the Chalice – the Body and Blood of Jesus, to show that Jesus' sacrifice, the breaking of His body and the outpouring of His precious blood continues to draw all people to Himself. We can only respond in Thomas' words:

My Lord and my God.

The word Eucharist means thanksgiving and tonight we give fervent thanks to Jesus for this most sacred and wonderful gift. He is truly with us as we offer this Holy Sacrifice and in the power of the Holy Spirit He is made present on the altar. Jesus commanded His disciples *do this in remembrance of me*. He gave them a great commission and gave them the permission and the power to make Him present – the great gift of the priesthood which continues to be passed on down the ages through Apostolic succession by the laying on of hands. So it is fitting that all in Holy Orders renew our ordination vows on this day. Through these vows priests undertake to celebrate this most holy sacrament in our faith communities as often as we can because this sacrament

unites and binds us all together as the Body of Christ. In it, we join in the worship of the angels and saints. We both participate in and are given a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

Never underestimate the power of this Sacrament. Through it we are reconciled with God through Christ, we join in the heavenly worship, and we receive the blessed presence of our Lord at Holy Communion. Together we become Christ's body and share His risen life. Finally we are called to share that life with others – proclaiming the gospel and living and working to God's praise and glory. We can only be Christ bearers if we first receive Him. That's why this Holy Sacrament has been, is and will remain the act of worship which is at the heart of our Faith. It is as necessary to our spiritual life as breathing is in our physical life. Without it, our spiritual life withers and dies. Never let anyone tell you that you do not need the grace of Holy Communion. Never let anyone tell you that receiving Jesus into your heart is not important. It is your lifeblood – the great gift that Jesus left us on this night so long ago. It binds us together in the new covenant in Jesus' blood through which our salvation depends. Anyone who tells you any different is telling you a lie! We need Jesus in this Holy Sacrament to refresh and sustain us to be His missionaries. No service of the word, however 'vibrant' can ever replace the power and the grace of this Sacrament.

So tonight as we enter into the mystery of Jesus' passion and death, let us give Him thanks and praise for the holy gift of His sacrifice which is renewed in this sacrament. Let us give thanks for His presence among us and in us as we receive His Body and Blood. Renewed and empowered by His Presence may He be the gift we carry out into our troubled world – the Paschal light of Christ and the hope of eternity.