

## Maundy Thursday Reflection - The Power of the Sign

This evening, we are journeying into the heart of the paschal mystery. All week, we've been conscious of the crisis coming to a head, the fomenting of hostility, the agitation of the authorities and instability of the crowd. Judas has been looking for an opportunity to betray his teacher. For Jesus, tonight is the moment of no turning back.

As the gospels tell the story, Jesus is attuned to what's befalling. He has discerned the heart of his betrayer; he knows his time 'is near'. And, so he prepares to share one last meal with his disciples. Ironically, it's a Passover meal. On the night the Jewish people celebrated their liberation by God from slavery in Egypt, God's own Son is to be taken captive. On the night the Jewish people were formed as a people, the community of Jesus' followers will disintegrate and flee. And in the face of all this, Jesus takes bread, blesses it and gives it to them, saying 'This is my body, given for you'.

Dominican theologian Timothy Radcliffe has suggested that what's going on here is 'the clash of two sorts of power' (2005.17). On the one hand, is the power of the political and religious authorities, the power of brute force to capture, repress and kill. And on the other, is the power of the sign. There is the forceful power of Pilate and his soldiers, and of the religious authorities and their club, and a completely different kind of power, the power of truth and love, revealed and made accessible through a symbolic act. For what Jesus proclaims in this ritual meal is that everything he has lived and taught about God's generosity, God's self-sharing, God's faithfulness and refusal to retaliate, holds true even now. In this action, he is affirming that whatever horror human beings perpetrate, whatever brutality or cowardice seems to triumph, God's meaning – which is love – will not be extinguished or overwhelmed.

At first glance, in the face of merciless brute force, Jesus' decision to enact this sign (spreading a table in the face of his enemies, to evoke Psalm 23) seems of little use. What possible help is this? Yet as we can testify 2000 years later, through this sign Jesus not only proclaimed his vision of God; he created a way for his community to continue to 'remember' who he is and who they are *in him* – the community of

Christ, of love. As such, this sign was and is 'effective'. It helps to bring about, to make real, that of which it speaks. By the power of this sign, Jesus *creates* and *recreates* community, even as it is threatened with dissolution and dispersal. In this sign, Jesus gives himself wholly to his disciples even as they are handing him over and running away.

The sign wasn't magic – it didn't override the threats and failings of the moment, but it did continue working deeply to subvert the impact of all that was conspiring to contradict his life and its meaning. As Radcliffe writes (2005.20), Jesus' sign *'was a creative and transforming act. He was to be handed over into the hands of his enemies ... to the brutal power of the Empire. He did not just passively accept this: he transformed it into a moment of grace. He made his betrayal into a moment of gift.'* Every time we share this meal, we too are proclaiming and enacting our trust that God's meaning holds true. And every time we share this meal, we are receiving a gift that can embrace loss, failure, and evil, and turn it to good – the gift of Christ's self-giving love.

But having said all that, tonight, we're present again to the vulnerability of this sign. We sense its fragility in the face of human heedlessness and callousness, the politics of self-interest and self-protection. Always on Maundy Thursday, I feel as if we're about to take the plunge. It's as if we're back with those first disciples, about to enter the forcefield of the paschal event. Jesus asks us to stay with him, to remain true, to watch and pray. But in the face of life's suffering and the business of the world, confronted by the fear of futility and of our own shadow, we recoil. Jesus is tempted to recoil too. This is his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. But still he gives himself, still his love endures, and with it, our hope that the world may be changed through him.

So, as we give ourselves to this Easter journey, through death and into life, we pray for steadfastness to remain present. In hope, let us humbly partake of the gift of the Last Supper, of Christ's life in ours, a sign that God's love remains and will bear us to the other side. Amen.