

Maundy Thursday 2023  
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR  
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the Name of the One who invites us on the journey through death to new life, Jesus the Bread for the Life of the World. Amen.

Welcome to the Maundy Thursday. Here we are at the boundary between Lent and Jesus' Passion and Resurrection. Over the centuries the Church has crammed so much into this single day and evening.

Boundaries tend to accumulate things. During the course of this day it has been traditional for ordained people to renew their vows, for everyone to go to confession, for the catechumens to receive one last blessing before their baptism, for everyone to do their spring cleaning to make all our houses fresh and ready for Easter, for Bishop's to bless healing oil and chrism, for alms to be given and feet washed. A multitude of customs have clustered at this boundary day, filling it with all kinds of getting ready, varying from time to time and culture to culture.

Our *αγαπη* meal was part of that for us, gathering us into community, making our hearts and minds ready, reminding us that the great Mandatum, or command, which gives the day its English name is 'to love one another as Jesus loved and loves us'.

Jesus regularly shared fellowship meals with his followers. Remember how he is accused of 'eating and drinking with sinners'? This night he does it again – and he acts as their servant, washing their feet covered with the dirt of the road, giving them the commandment to similarly show love and concern to one another, recognizing and meeting their needs. We had our own fellowship meal, eating simple food together, and praying and re-enacting the custom of a far-off time of showing hospitality by washing another's feet clean of the dust of dirt roads. So many elaborate rituals have been developed to try to express all that people saw and felt during their remembrance.

The footwashing and giving of alms are deeply part of this day. The Pope washes people's feet. King Charles and Queen Camilla followed the British Custom of monarchs giving Maundy money to people who have themselves served those in great need. There are many ways of enacting our response to Jesus' command that we love one another. Jesus is here with us now – and we are his hands serving the world, now. "Remember to be servants, and so show others the love that God has shown you." That is the final, over-arching command.

After all the scramble to make everything ready, we come to the beginning of the Triduum itself. Jesus is bound on his journey to and through death. His gift before he goes is the Eucharist, an everlasting memorial,

The Greek word here *αναμνησις* means bringing something past into the present, an idea not quite caught in the words 'memorial' or 'remembrance'. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist it is an *αναμνησις*, Jesus is well and truly with us. We celebrate this gift with joy. '

One way of thinking about the Bread and the Wine, the Body and the Blood, is to think about them as the two ends of Jesus' earthly life. The Bread, the Body, is his incarnation. This is the beginning, when God takes on human flesh and comes to live among us as one of us, sharing our life completely.

The Wine, the Blood, is his death. This is the end, his willing sacrifice on our behalf, taking into himself all the violence and rejection that human society can offer, and swallowing it whole, washing away all its consequences with his own blood. The beginning and the ending of Jesus' life are here in this meal, in this Eucharist.

This last time of gathering in a fairly normal way, this ending of the story of Jesus time with his friends, sets the stage for the agony in the garden, the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion. This service begins the Sacred Triduum, the Sacred three days, during which Christ goes right through death into a whole new kind of life.

So this ending is a beginning. Once we have reached this ending, there is no turning back. Death is inevitable.

Endings and beginnings. For us this celebration of the establishment of our Communion meal marks the last time it will be celebrated before it is all new again on Easter. And so the service ends with stripping the Altar and the whole area around it of any decoration, any candles or linens or hangings or bread or wine or oil or bells. All gone. The Tabernacle, that little cupboard where Christ is always present in the Reserved Sacrament, will be empty. The hanging lamp representing his presence will be dark.

Then the altar is washed with clean water and herbs, washed in silence with reverence and awe. This is where Christ has come to us in the Eucharist. Now it is bare, representing his body broken for us and dead, being washed for burial. A clear and dramatic ending.

Beginnings and endings. Tonight brings all of the stories to a close, but opens the way to a new story, a new journey, right through death to new life, right through human violence and rejection to the triumphant love of God.

All that we do together on this night is meant to give us the strength to leap into the darkness. The Eucharist is the food which sees us through all the gray and troubling times of our lives, but it is particularly the food that binds us together as a people who can continue to live as those bearing the Death of Christ in our hearts and bodies every day.

Tonight we begin the sacred Triduum, the three days of the Mystery with the same meal that will end it. We go into the time of trial and suffering and death and desolation with the knowledge of its outcome – and that is why we can go in with confidence and open ourselves fully to the experience.

Good Friday and Holy Saturday are a black and empty time. We kneel during this long night in reverence and awe at the boundless Love which came into our bleak world to fill it with joy and hope, only to be violently spurned by righteous people. We allow ourselves to move into this great desolation, to stare openly at the appalling Death of the One who loves us totally, to accept our own guilt as rejecters of the Divine Offer of Love. All that we have done during Lent of study and prayer and abstinence has been to prepare us to enter fully into the great Mystery; and all that we do on Maundy Thursday is intended to bind us together as Christ's own Body so that we may plunge together into that Mystery of Christ's suffering, death, and ultimate triumph. This day is the beginning of the Church's defining time, the time when we rediscover who we are and why we are.

The eucharist itself is an extraordinary gift, a way that God feeds us directly and makes us one with Christ. This is when and how it all began. On this night it tends to be celebrated with extra pomp. We dig out the Sanctus bells which have not rung through all the solemn weeks of Lent. But at this service we are reveling in the wonder of the sacrament, so we are compelled to express our wonderment and awe with beautiful vestments and candles and bells, but as this service ends, all bells are silenced, all vestments and decoration taken away. We enter into Jesus' journey to and through death stripped down to bare black, clean and blank and ready for something new.

There is a lovely European tradition that says that after the Eucharistic celebrations of Maundy Thursday evening, all the bells take wing and fly away to Rome, where they sleep peacefully on the roof of Saint Peter's until it is time to celebrate the first Eucharist of Easter in each church. I love the idea of winged bells, small handbells and great church bells all flying through the night sky to their rest and then flying back to startle us with their clamor welcoming the Resurrection, with the return of light and color and spectacular music, as the Triduum culminates in Jesus' resurrection, the triumph of life and love over death and destruction.

I will conclude with a lovely prayer meant to be used as part of preparation to receive communion.

Merciful and loving God,

Your love compels us to come in.

Our hands are unclean, our hearts are unprepared;

We are not fit even to eat the crumbs from under your table.

But you are the God of our salvation, and share your bread with sinners.

So cleanse and feed us with the precious Body and Blood of your Son,

That he may live in us and we in him;

And that we with the whole company of all faithful people

may sit and eat in your kingdom. Amen.