

## Maundy Thursday 2006

‘Yes ... but ...what do you mean?’ someone is once supposed to have asked the composer Robert Schumann. ‘I mean this,’ he replied, and played the piece again.

‘Yes ... but ...what do you mean?’ they asked Jesus. ‘I mean this,’ he replied, and took bread, gave thanks, broke and shared it. And that piece has been played in every conceivable setting and in every known language ever since.

But so familiar are we with the Eucharist that we often forget just how perilous this sacrament is. Had we read the next few verses of our epistle, we would have heard that old trouble-maker, St Paul, in his robust way, taking issue with the cliquish pot-luck supper into which the Eucharist at Corinth had clearly degenerated.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. (1 Cor 11:27-31)

And this – let’s not forget – is the earliest account of the Eucharist that we have; the Gospel narratives of the Last Supper were written later. We cannot somehow get behind St Paul and find a milder, less perilous account of the Lord’s Supper. This is a glorious and a perilous thing we do here tonight. If we approach it without the authentic faith, recognition, and discernment that it calls for, then our participation hardens and coarsens us; the act confirms and intensifies our insensitivity and lack of integrity.

Over what Paul means by ‘a failure to discern the body’, much academic ink has been spilt. It is ambiguous.

One failure of discernment is to fail to see the presence of the risen body of the Lord through whom we participate in these gifts. Christ comes to us in the meal of the Eucharist. This is not some stage-show. There’s no getting away from the nature of what we are to receive in a few moments; at the very moment of eating, at the moment of drinking, we will be reminded: ‘The Body of Christ; The Blood of Christ’.

‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood,’ says Jesus, ‘abide in me and I in them.’

In these signs the Risen Lord incorporates bread and wine – the work of our hands – into his spiritual body and as we feed upon them we are incorporated into his person in anticipation of the ultimate transformation and healing that still awaits us. Failure to realise the objective reality of that is, says St Paul, perilous.

The second great danger of the Eucharist lies in our failure to discern the body as meaning the body of Christ - the Church. The ruin of the Eucharist in Corinth lay in the breaking up of the assembly along social and class lines and the failure to discern the church as the body of Christ. We are warned, therefore, that a wholehearted commitment to the life and the unity of our particular congregation is essential to the integrity of our communion. We must ask ourselves: 'Have I failed to make peace with my fellow communicant before I approach the altar? Am I indifferent to the hunger and thirst of the millions even as I eat and drink the sacrament?'

So, in both senses of the word 'body', if we do this thing unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly – if we do it without discerning the body – we eat and drink judgment upon ourselves, and Incarnate Love is betrayed at this table just as he was at the first in that upper room.

Well, I must put my hand up and say, 'Guilty as charged – on both counts.'

Mine is a guilt and a bitterness which is perfectly encapsulated in this liturgy, for we shall go from the Upper Room to Gethsemane tonight. This is Maundy Thursday, the day on which Christ gave us his body and blood, *and* the day on which we handed that body over to destruction. It's all 'Gloria' and gold vestments for now – until we have tasted that ultimate gift – then that Body, containing in itself all sweetness, is bundled up and hidden away. The table – which stands for Christ – is systematically dishonoured, robbed of its lights, stripped of its clothing, and abandoned. Christ has given himself to us – and within a few minutes we fling him down.

Where in any of this is Good News?

In this: That it is not so much the sweetness of what comes before that makes the bitterness of what follows more intense but rather it is the bitterness of what follows that makes the sweetness more intense. The awfulness of Gethsemane and Gabbatha and Golgotha makes the gift at supper even more fearful and wonderful.

The treachery of the Garden later does not reverse the promise of the Upper Room. Rather, as Jesus gives us his body and blood, he does it in the full knowledge of our perfidy to come. Our betrayal after that first Mass was more treacherous than any that humanity is capable of but our weakness was, before it had even happened, lost in the sweetness of his love.

Whether we betray him through sleep or flight or plot or cowardice or spite, at this and every Eucharist, he wipes it all away, he washes us, and we stand before him again without spot or stain, and in us his victory is made yet more complete.

Which, I suppose, is why St John chooses to give us the foot washing instead of the more familiar narrative of the institution of the Lord's Supper. The whole of his gospel is, after all, eucharistic in shape and allusion. But this servile act of washing serves the same purpose. In reminding us of our Baptism at the beginning of his Passion, it is an

expression of God's determination to show us the fullness of his love – a love to the end – prevenient to the very worst that we can muster.

'Do you know what I have done to you?' Jesus asks his disciples as he washes their feet. Tonight as we feed on Christ in the bread and the cup, we too look down at him at our feet and hear him ask us, 'Do you know what I have done to you?'

'Lord, you have done to us tonight what you do to us week by week. In this holy eating and drinking you unite yourself afresh with us. You nourish what is needy in us, you wash what is soiled. You give of your body on the Cross and graft us into your body. You restore us to where we belong.'