March 28, 2013 – Maundy Thursday

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Today we are celebrating Maundy Thursday, otherwise known as Holy Thursday, Covenant Thursday, Thursday of Mysteries, or as the prosaic Church of England calls it, Thursday before Easter.  There's a lot going on both in today's Gospel, and in our tradition that are important to keep in mind today.

First of all, the day itself.  The word *Maundy* comes from the Latin *Mandatum*, meaning commandment.  It comes from the Latin translation of "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another, which I'll get to in a minute.  In the ancient Church, the Great Vigil of Easter was the most important day of the church year.  This was later expanded to a three day commemoration which started on the evening of Maundy Thursday and went through the Easter Vigil.  So Maundy Thursday is really the start of our Easter celebration, reminding us that Easter includes the passion and death of Jesus, as well as the resurrection.

Some of the traditional rituals that are held on Maundy Thursday are the foot washing, the stripping of the altar, the procession of the sacraments to the Altar of Repose, or in our case, to my office, and the all night vigil before the blessed sacraments.

Since we don't actually HAVE an altar of repose, it's a little difficult to process there or to hold a vigil there.  And an all night vigil before the blessed sacraments might be more easily done in a church with a lot of people.

I had never even heard of this practice until we moved back to Minneapolis from Boston in 1997 and St. Mark's Cathedral held a vigil Maundy Thursday night.  In their case, they had many people to sign up for one or two hour time slots, so no one person had to be there all night long.  I found it to be a wonderful, prayerful experience, so if anyone were interested in that next year, I'd be happy to organize it.

The stripping of the altar is also something we commonly do, and it symbolizes a few things.  First, it shows that we are in mourning.  Anything that smacks of our normally joyful celebration is removed.  Candles are snuffednd not relit until Easter morning, or during the Easter Vigil if it is observed. Flowers are removed, crosses are veiled, and all decorative linens are put away.  It is a physical reminder to us of our sadness going into Good Friday.

Second, and maybe a little less known, is that in the ancient church the Eucharist was often celebrated on someone's tomb.  This is the reason that most altars, in older churches at least, are around seven feet long and three feet wide – they aren't tombs any more, but they are meant to look like one.  In stripping off the alter linens, the sarcophagus is uncovered and represents the fact that all we see until Easter morning is the closed tomb of Jesus.  And finally, the stripping of the altar represents the stripping of Christ's garments at his crucifixion.

In the Medieval church, and in some very high liturgical churches today, there was a lot of ritual surrounding the stripping of the altar. There are antiphons and psalms sung or recited, and the celebrant and assistants vest in purple stoles. Sometimes the altar was scrubbed in a ritual way with a hyssop branch dipped in water and wine. This represented Christ’s blood and water, and also the blood of the lamb that was spread on the lintels of the Jews in Egypt at Passover. This isn’t done much anymore at least in part because it makes a really big mess, but if you look at some old altars, especially in Europe, you will see the wine stains from ages past.

And finally there’s the Maundy Thursday ritual of the foot washing. Foot washing seems to have continued pretty much without a break since John’s Gospel, which is the only place in which it appears. It was so important that it was able to survive both the schism between the eastern and western churches, and the Reformation, and it continued to be practiced by all sides in those conflicts in the church.

The idea of servant leadership is very popular in the church today. The kind of service that Jesus is proposing here is not a one-time display of false humility, nor is it merely trading roles and pretending to be a servant for awhile. This is not a servanthood of dominance or of submission, but a servanthood of friendship. This is a form of servanthood where each is the servant to the other, and where seeking the good of the other is mutually beneficial. This is what Jesus is getting at here, and what he spells out explicitly later in John in chapter 15, where he tells his disciples that he no longer calls them servants, but now calls them friends.

Which brings us to the most important part of Maundy Thursday. All of the observances I mentioned are important, but they are all really given meaning by the last three lines of our Gospel reading today. This is where Jesus says to his disciples:

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Love one another. Just as Jesus does, love one another. You will be known as disciples of Christ if you love one another. This verse only appears in John, and it’s considered so important that this passage is read every Maunday Thursday. This is the centerpiece of the Easter Triduum. The Gospel of John is full of sayings like this, and they all point to Easter. For example:

John 3:15 - For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 15:13 – No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

Love is the bottom line. On Thursday Jesus washes his disciples’ feet to show that they aren’t his servants, but rather his friends. On Friday, he lays down his life for those friends, and for us. And on Sunday he rises triumphantly from the dead and assures us of our eternal life with him. And all because God so loved the world. And all he asks us in return is to love him and to love each other.

Let us pray.

Loving Provider, you gather me in this upper room with your son, to be bed by your love. At that supper, Jesus told us to “love one another” and I know that this is the heart of his gift, his sacrifice for me. I ask that I might find the source of my own heart, the meaning for my own life, in his holy and precious gift. Guide me to the fullness of your love and life.

Amen.