We proclaim his death

Holy Thursday 2017

Gathering with his disciples for the Paschal Meal for the last time was a time of deep significance for the Lord. St Luke tells us that he commented, “I have longed to eat this supper with you”. (Lk 22:15) It was the Last Supper. It was a time of parting. He had gathered his small band of apostles and had formed and guided them over a period of some three years. He had chosen the number of twelve to replicate the twelve tribes of Israel. They were to be the foundation of the New Israel, the Church.

For three years they had travelled together. They had shared in some profound moments, like the feeding of the five thousand. The apostles had witnessed his extraordinary miracles. They had joined the crowds as the Lord instructed them, spellbound by his words. They had been the beneficiaries of his private tuition. They had come to believe in him. They had come to love him.

They were now a close knit group. They had shared so much together. They were united with their Lord. Their fate was tied to his. As Peter had said, “Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the words of everlasting life”. (Jn 6:68)

And Jesus loved them. He would tell them so during this meal. St John commented that he loved those who were his own even to the end (see Jn 13:1). They were a motely bunch, but they were men of good heart. They still had a long way to go, but they were on a journey and there was still so much for them to learn. The Lord commented that some things were too much for them now, but the Holy Spirit would guide them into the fullness of truth (see Jn 16:12). They did not know what was to about to unfold and they would be stunned and confused as events quickly occurred. Jesus knew all this and this final meal together was to be one of great meaning. Its meaning would transcend the moment. It would set in place a pattern for his disciples for all time.

As they gathered for that final Paschal Meal together, the apostles must have sensed that something was different. The Lord was especially solemn and serious. His words had the mark of deep significance.

It was the annual Jewish celebration of the Passover. This Paschal Meal was the religious highpoint of the year. It was the commemoration of the most significant manifestation of the saving power of God for his people: the deliverance from Egypt. The ritual was set out in great clarity. It was recorded in the most significant of the Scriptures for the Jewish People, the book of Exodus. We read the instructions in our first reading this evening.

The meal began unexpectedly. Jesus wanted to wash their feet, and did so. He assumed the posture of a servant. Peter protested, expressing no doubt the embarrassment of his fellow disciples. This should not happen. But the Lord had a teaching moment and more importantly he wanted to show in symbol that he had come to serve. What was about to befall him was his ultimate act of service. He would give his very life for his disciples, for all of humanity.

Thus, the meal began. As the ritual aspects of the meal were adhered to Jesus calmly said that there was one at the table who would betray him. This would have sent ripples of reaction, looks, gasps and questioning eyes. For the Lord his coming fate laid heavily upon his thoughts.

St John records the moving discourse, his final teaching. He spoke to them at length about love and union with him, about the gift of the Holy Spirit. He spoke about sending the Spirit of Truth who would guide and assist them. They would have another advocate, another helper. They would not be abandoned. He prayed to the Father for them.

This meal was different from others that they had had with him.

He celebrated the ancient rituals but he changed them. He spoke of the bread as his Body, and the wine as his Blood. Everything he did had deep purpose. He said, “Do this in memory of me”. It was to be his special testament; his abiding gift.

“Do this in memory of me”. It was signalling that this was the end to what they had known. There would now be a new means by which he would live with them, or more wonderfully, live in them.

The holy Eucharist would be the way in which he, the risen Lord, would abide always with is disciples. He was going away, but he was not leaving his disciples orphans.

The apostles could only look on and try to fathom the significance of what was unfolding. It was completely beyond their understanding at this time. But it would all come to have meaning, after the resurrection.

Thus, tonight, my brethren, we join the apostles at their last supper with the Lord. We know its full context and powerful meaning.

It is a moment to quietly reflect on the gift of Christ’s Body and Blood given to us at Mass. To realise that this gift is realised through Calvary and the Resurrection. It is Christ’s great gift to us.

In times past we always spoke of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. This designation captures a deep meaning. Every Mass takes us to Calvary. Every Mass offers us the grace of salvation realised on Calvary. As St Paul reminded us in the second reading this evening, “Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death”.

Every time we receive holy communion let us be conscious of this as a communion with the death of Christ. We are being drawn into the saving mystery of his death on calvary.

Each time we receive Holy Communion we are embracing the redemption won for us on Calvary. Every Mass draws us into the power of God to save.

Archbishop Julian Porteous

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