

THE SACRED TRIDUUM (2017)

The Mass of the Lord's Supper: Maundy Thursday

Slavery was ubiquitous in the ancient world. Even a poor household might have a slave. No one ever suggested the abolition of slavery because it was everywhere and it was thought to be necessary for the smooth running of society. Slavery was the means of wealth creation in the great Empires of the ancient world, for it meant cheap labour and low production costs; and it gave the wealthy the time to pursue the interests of the civilized. No one considered it to be evil; though for many it was not good; and for not a few it was a death-sentence. People sold themselves into slavery to pay off debts or to improve their living conditions; and some sold their children as an act of survival. To think of abolition was inconceivable; you might as well ban people from breathing.

This evening and tomorrow we will be reflecting upon slavery, because today and tomorrow Jesus puts himself in the role of a slave and teaches us to do likewise. Both ideas must have been profoundly, shockingly, disturbing to his contemporaries.

Slavery in the ancient world was not the same as slavery in more modern times, when people, always black, were captured, often in Africa, and forcibly deported in horrific conditions to work in deplorable situations at back-breaking work with no consideration for their humanity. Indeed, in order to justify their exploitation, many questioned whether they were in fact human.

Nevertheless there were some similarities. For those at the bottom of the slave-scale in the ancient world, those who worked in the mines or in the fields, those who were sold to row in the galleys, these people would have brutalised and short lives. Other slaves, in households lived in better conditions, though some would be manacled at night for fear of escape or revolt. The Master had total control over his slaves, the power of life and death and all in between. Some slaves were treated well, and were a valued part of the household, tutoring the children, managing affairs. Cicero had a slave who was his secretary and amanuensis. Tiro developed a form of shorthand for taking notes at his master's speeches. Cicero would free him and buy him a farm in gratitude for his years of service and friendship. Manumission, liberation was sought and often obtained, and the former-slave's children could be citizens of Rome, taking the name of their father's former master as he had done when given his freedom.

Even the relatively poor would have a slave in the Roman -Greek world. There were slaves too in Judah. The Hebrew Bible speaks of slaves but, uniquely in the ancient world they are given some rights in the Law. The Sabbath rest is to be kept by everyone in the household - male and female, and slave and animals.

Fear of revolt by slaves was an ever present threat. The spectre of Spartacus haunted every Roman freedman. Hence the punishment for slave-revolt was merciless – crucifixion, a slow and tortured way of dying, which gave cheap entertainment even as it horrified the on-lookers. In the Empire it was those who rebelled against the

State and slaves who ran away who would be shown no mercy and be condemned to die a death which Cicero refused to speak about, simply saying it is 'too horrible'.

Our Bible-translators on whom introduce a distinction between 'slave' and 'servant'; the latter having a more genteel connotation. It is a false distinction. There is one Greek word '*doulos*' which means 'slave'; some one with no rights except to be obedient and do his master's bidding, promptly. Mary, when she declares herself to be "The handmaid of the Lord" calls herself "*doule kyrion*" - the slave-girl! of the Lord.

Slaves of course did the lowly and the distasteful jobs, as well as the back-breaking ones, including bending low to wash the feet of a visitor or guest. No one did the job of a slave for them. To do so would be shocking, grotesque; an appalling crossing of boundaries that should never be traversed. Yet, in John's story Jesus performs this most menial of tasks. He the Master, teacher and Lord takes basin and towel and washes the feet of disciple, pupil, follower. It is a striking reversal of expectations.

All the evangelists show Jesus acting on this night of his arrest in a way that would have defied comprehension among those who were with him. In the Synoptic accounts (Mark, Matthew, Luke) Jesus takes bread and breaks it, identifying himself with the food; and takes wine and pours it, saying this is his blood. The disciples must have been shocked, mystified. Only in the grim light of the crucifixion could they have made the association: his body, bread broken; his blood, like the wine, poured out. In John, there is no account here of these words, the fourth Gospel writer places them much earlier in chapter 6 of his story. Here instead we have the washing of the feet. Jesus takes the servant's position and instructs them to do as he has done. It is a teaching many times repeated in different forms through all the Gospels. "You must be the salve of all"... "Take the lowest place".. "the first will be last and the last first"... God's way is to "cast down the mighty and raise the lowly". And now, "If I, your servant and master have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet".

These actions and words must have been as opaque as the words about bread and wine. They would become more transparent when Jesus died; and so for John would his taking the role of slave when he saw the manner of his dying.

As we hear tomorrow, Jesus died the death of a slave, a grotesque, prolonged torture; yet he did so, in John's telling of the Passion, as king and as God.

The Commemoration of the Lord's Passion Good Friday

Yesterday evening we reflected on slavery in the ancient world. In the Roman Empire it was ubiquitous. Even the poor would have a slave. And the wealthy might have thousands. Slaves made the Empire very rich. Wherever the Legions marched, from there would come back slaves; cogs for the wheels of commerce, agriculture and wealth-creation.

Jesus, in John's Gospel, takes the role of a slave on the night of his arrest. He acted out the teaching that he had consistently taught: to take the lowest place.. to be the slave of all... now he says, If I your Lord and Master have done this to you, you must serve, be a slave to one another. No one wanted to be a slave, even though circumstances made some choose that path. Every slave desired their freedom. Slavery deprived you of all rights; placed you in the power of a master who had absolute control over you, even able to kill you on whim, and there was, at this time, no penalty. Slaves were disposable. There were always more.

Jesus' teaching was disconcerting, shocking. But he was only acting the part; he played a role.

After his arrest he lived the final hours of his life as a slave; for crucifixion was the fate of those who rebelled against the authority of Rome, and the destiny of slaves. Romans required slaves but they also feared them. When Spartacus' rebellion was finally suppressed, Crassus the general who ended the revolt (and the richest man in Rome) lined the many miles of the Appian Way, the road from Rome to the South, with slaves crucified.

Jesus was no longer playing a part. He now was a slave, entirely in the power of others for life and death. And when condemned, as the authorities knew he would be, he faced a prolonged torture, as a public spectacle for the Romans did not want anyone to doubt that an errant slave was to be crushed but very slowly. They employed scourging as an additional torture which could also be an act of mercy. The harsher the flogging, the less time in more fierce pain on the cross before the welcome end.

John does not dwell on the pain. Everyone would have been shockingly familiar with what was involved. But he does something more astonishing. From the opening verses of the Gospel we have known that Jesus is "The Word made flesh"; and that "The Word was with God and the Word was God". Through the narrative Jesus' divinity has been apparent. He knows about people who he has never before met; he has power to heal, to perform signs which surpass what the great prophets did. He has spoken of himself as the Temple whose destruction he has foretold. The Temple was the place of God's presence among his people; and the place where sacrifices were offered for the forgiveness of sins by which mankind was reconciled with God. John makes it clear: Jesus is the new Temple for he embodies in his flesh the presence of God among his people; he is the one whose sacrifice will forgive sins, reconciling humanity with God.

So in this Passion story two things are happening simultaneously: a slave is dying the death of a slave; and God among us is being killed. John's vision is astonishing in its scope and power.

As John tells the story we see Jesus, though in the power of Pilate, as the one who is in control. Jesus is the still centre of the action that whirls around him while Pilate is inside and outside, vacillating and ultimately powerless. After all, Jesus has already said, "No one takes my life from me; I lay it down and I will take it up again". Jesus though flogged, mocked, spat upon, crowned with thorns, all the usual humiliations of slowly, spitefully killing someone who was worthless except as a cheap and easy laugh, Jesus is supreme. He needs no Simon to help carry his cross; he arranges his affairs from the cross, entrusting mother to beloved disciple and him to her; fulfilling the Scriptures and dying only when "All is accomplished".

Jesus is both slave and freeborn Son of the Most High God.

This is absurd. In literature a writer can bring together opposites for dramatic effect. The ensuing contradiction, a verbal paradox is called an oxymoron. Now John the evangelist brings together two complete opposites but this is no verbal trick. He is saying that Jesus is both slave and God. A slave, a lowly minion dependent on the whim of a master, cannot be almighty, all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect and everything else that we say is 'God'.

John, however, gives us a link between the two; a bridge of meaning that allows us to see the two in focus together. That lens is the image of 'the lamb'. The Hebrew Bible is full of pastoral colour. We hear many times of shepherds and sheep. "The Lord is my shepherd" being but the most familiar. John has already identified the lamb that he wants us to think of. When the Baptist appeared to give witness, he sent his disciples after Jesus whom he has identified as "the Lamb of God". When Pilate condemns Jesus we are told, in this fourth Gospel, that it was about noon – the time the priests began the sacrifice of the numerous lambs in the Temple for the Passover celebration that evening. The equivalence is clear. Jesus is the lamb, The Passover Lamb whose slaughter and consumption was a requirement for the children of Israel to escape from slavery in Egypt and progress in freedom to becoming God's holy people, joined to God by covenant at Sinai.

Slaves were brought to freedom and life with their God through the death of a lamb. In John's astonishing vision Jesus is both slave, one with his people; and God - "I and the Father are one" he has said; and he is the link that binds them- the lamb of sacrifice whose blood brings reconciliation, healing, liberation, a new beginning.

John invites us to reconsider our notion of God, who has come among us as slave; and to imitate the life and death of service that God reveals to us to be the way to life with God.

Matthew has the instincts of a tabloid journalist. We saw this on Passion (Palm) Sunday in his Passion story. He has the ear for a choice phrase and an eye for a telling image. So he 'improves' on Mark's account by telling us of Judas' motive – greed, and the cost of betrayal – 30 pieces of silver, and the fate of the traitor, suicide by hanging; he gives us the picture of Pilate washing his hands; and the sensational description of the saintly dead rising from their tombs as well as the plot of the scheming authorities to put out the false story of the disciples stealing the body.

All those journalistic traits are employed again in Matthew's resurrection story. He is clearly uncomfortable with Mark's ending. Mark has told us that the women went to the tomb with spices to anoint the body and complete the burial rites. They found the stone removed and a man in white instructed them to tell Peter and the disciples that Jesus has gone before them to Galilee. "There they will find him as he told them." This recalls the one note of hope in the gloom of the Passion story which Jesus had spoken amid the prophecies of betrayal and denial as they walked to Gethsemane. But, Mark concluded, "the women said nothing to anyone for they were afraid". And the Gospel ends with no narratives of appearances, no final message from the Risen Lord. The last cord of Mark's "Beginning of the God News" is a shrill shout of fear.

That is not satisfactory for Matthew. He does not want a dramatic unfinished '*pendens*', a story left hanging in the air; he wants a proper ending to the tale, with noise and resolution. He knows people will want to know what happened. So he tells us. An earthquake, an angel, terrified soldiers, resolute women; and Jesus himself, alive and able to be worshipped. The women get the message from Jesus himself, not from a messenger, however heavenly. They fall at his feet and adore. Jesus has been adored many times in his earthly life, beginning with the Magi who bowed down and did him homage. That had suggested Jesus' divinity. Now we are left in no doubt.

Matthew's final scene will be a fitting conclusion, summarising the themes of his great work. On a mountain in Galilee, in a location like the one where he gave his new Law on his own authority, he tells his disciples, some of whom are still in doubt, that all authority has indeed been given to him and he with a share in that power now sends them out to the whole world to make disciples of all nations, baptising in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And lest we be in any doubt, he concludes telling them that he will be with them always, "yes, to the end of time".

The Gospel opened with "The Genesis of Jesus, son of David, Son of Abraham," taking us all the way back to the dawn of history when God said, "Let there be light" and all came into being. The Gospel ends looking forward to the end of time, so commands the whole sweep of time and space. And Jesus in saying "I am with you" reminds us that Joseph was told that Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures that announced "A Virgin is with child and will give birth to a son who will be named 'Emmanuel', a name which means 'God-is-with-us'." Here is Jesus, God among us, God with us. Matthew uses all his considerable journalistic, tabloid skills to proclaim the Risen One, God with us.

Sunday: Mass of the Day.

We have followed John's telling of the story of a divine-slave. Such is the overwhelming love of God revealed to us in Christ that God assumes the role of a slave, washing his disciples' feet but then take the role into reality when he endures the cruel and humiliating death of a slave; but as John describes the arrest, the trial, the condemnation and the dying process it is clear that Jesus, divine through the Gospel, is here supreme, fully in command; both slave and king; associating with the lowest of human kind and bringing to them and thus to all humanity the life of God.

It is a love story; the whole of the Hebrew Bible is a love story, telling of God's constant, faithful abiding love, which seldom meets with adequate response. Jesus however tells us to do as he has done, to love to the end for such love has no end. The Resurrection is God's affirmation that love has no end.

In the latter part of his Gospel John shows the primacy of love through the interplay of two of the main characters among Jesus' followers. Peter has been present from the outset, brought to meet Jesus by his brother Andrew and re-named *Cephas* – Rocky. Among that initial group there is an unnamed disciple who may be later reintroduced by the title – he is never identified by a personal name, of “The disciple Jesus loved”. This follower appears only in the scenes that take place around Jerusalem, which may therefore be his home. He has the place of honour, reclining at the Last Super on Jesus' right and so can rest his head on Jesus' breast. He is thereby able to do as Peter suggests and ask Jesus who the betrayer is. Later that evening an un-named disciple (is it the Beloved One?) gains entry for Peter into the courtyard of the High Priest's house, where he three times denies any knowledge of his master. Peter fades from the action but the 'Disciple Jesus loved' is at the foot of the cross where the 'Mother of the Lord' is entrusted into his care. He becomes an honorary brother of Jesus, a part of the natural family, though by adoption, as he has been part of the family of fellowship. We are also told by the narrator that it is upon the testimony of this Beloved Disciple that the Truth of the Gospel stands.

This is a key figure in the evangelist's world. And his chief characteristic is love. Peter's chief characteristic has been misguided zeal and failure.

Now, on hearing the news from Mary Magdalene they run together to the tomb. Love out-paces zeal and the Beloved Disciple gets there first. He waits. Peter, as brash as ever, walks straight in but we are not told of any reaction. The 'Disciple Jesus loved' now enters, sees the grave clothes, and immediately believes. Love has insight that is lost to normal sight.

The two appear together again in the final chapter of the Gospel. They are fishing. The Beloved Disciple is the first to recognise the Lord who stands on the shore. Again love gives insight. By a charcoal fire Peter had denied the Lord three times; now by a charcoal fire he is asked three times if he loves the Lord. Three times, as he gets increasingly anxious and cross at the repetition he affirms his love and is commissioned to feed Jesus' lambs and sheep. “Lord, you know all things. You know I love you.” Peter has become the Loving Disciple. For Love is the key; love is the

answer.

The Gospel ends with a reference to the death of the Beloved Disciple, whom some had thought would live to see the Lord's return in glory. No; the one who stands behind the Gospel Story has died; but we know as he knew that Love has no end, for those who love to the end.