

Some words for Maundy Thursday

*We should glory in the Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ,
in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection,
through whom we are saved and delivered.¹*

Readings:

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14

Psalms 115: 12-13, 15-18. R. 1 Cor 10:16

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-15

Dear Parishioner of St Joseph's & St Charles,

It is hard to credit that it was only the evening of Friday, 20 March, that our churches ceased to be able to hold public services and then, sadly, closed completely on the Tuesday of the following week, the morning after the prime ministerial broadcast. It already seems a long time ago.

Like many parish priests I was particularly frustrated that Friday, 20 March. I had been hoping and praying that we might just be able to reach the Sunday before being forced to cease our coming together. Just a couple more days was all I wanted, so that we could have more easily prepared and informed, distributed prayers and booklets and made some practical provisions for those who needed a bit of extra help or support. It was not to be. With almost unseemly haste we packed up and went. This packing up and going is however at the heart of what we are about on this night. The Holy Eucharist is, after all, food for a journey.

The night begins by our remembrance that our Christian Eucharist took shape when Jesus and his disciples recalled the first Passover, the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt, *'You shall eat it like this: with a girdle round your waist, sandals on your feet, a staff in your hand. You shall eat it hastily.'*² This Passover forms the heart of our remembrance for, having taken some bread, which he then blessed and broke, and having taken a cup of wine that he offered in the same way, the Lord commanded, *'do this as a memorial of me.'*³ How does this night of the Lord's Supper end though? It ends when the Church, having throughout the world celebrated the institution of the Most Holy Eucharist in a simple yet worthy manner, contemplates Our Lord being bundled away in a brisk and cruel way from Gethsemane.

The first Exodus saw the hurried flight of God's people and, after the initial sense of joy and deliverance from slavery and the exultation of the overthrow of Pharaoh's army into the Red Sea, Israel found herself wandering the desert for forty years, often reluctant to bear the yoke of God's Word and unsatisfied by *Manna* from above. Yet, this bread from the heavens proved sufficient to sustain them until they crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land. A desert ration, apportioned appropriate to need, the *Manna* fed the People of God until its goal was achieved. So too will the Holy Eucharist nourish and sustain us until its purpose is accomplished here on earth. For the Lord gives himself to us; he gives us what we need. It is most certainly not always what we want or even what we think we want but it is more, more than enough.

I am afraid it is not much to look at this Holy Eucharist, this Body and Blood of Christ, but he looked far less impressive when he was hanging on the Cross. What about us? Do we, the visible Body of Christ look any better? Fed by a heavenly diet there are nevertheless times when we look decidedly unhealthy and unappealing; the Body of Christ softened and shamed by sin, disfigured by scandal and abuse, bruised by hostility and persecution, both pinched thin by boredom and indifference yet also grown fat by affluence and complacency. Is it a surprise? There are, after all, over a billion of us and there seems hardly 'sufficient' Eucharist to do the job of changing the world. It's like the *Manna* in the desert all over again; to the senses Holy Communion is tiny, nothing more than a thin waxy wafer and a sip of something syrupy.

It is true, that the Eucharist is not normally a lot to eat or drink – often far from it - but until He comes again in glory it is all that we have and it is more, far more than we need. Despite her woes and the individual sins of all the members the Body of Christ is still a light, proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and our need of God's mercy, upholding the dignity of life, the beauty of creation and, each and every day, is witness to countless acts of Faith, Hope and Love.

As we yearn, especially on this night, to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion we might naturally cast our mind back and think when did I last receive Him in His real presence? We might, perhaps, regret taking such an experience for granted and now wonder when will we be able to celebrate the Eucharist together and receive once again the Body and Blood of Our Lord? I ask you to fret not, that which you have received will do for now, '*Give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me.*'⁴

However long ago it is since you last received Holy Communion know that this food for the journey is like no other food on earth. *'This is the bread come down from heaven; not like the bread our ancestors ate: they are dead, but anyone who eats this bread will live for ever.'*⁵ Ultimately, this sustenance harvested beyond the horizon of physics is not given for today but for the morrow. The Eucharist, the Paschal Mystery of Christ's saving death and resurrection enrobed with the form of bread and poured out in the form of wine, is food for eternity. Just as we reach back by the offering of the Holy Sacrifice of Christ in the Mass, across time and space, to Calvary and the empty tomb so do we also touch the things of heaven here on earth. For in our Eucharistic communion we find the beginning of fulfilment, the promise and foretaste of the Lord, *'I shall not drink wine until the day I drink new wine with you in the kingdom of my Father.'*⁶ In Christ we abide and He abides in us.

The grace of Christ in his Holy Eucharist has no *Sell by...* date for the blood price has been paid, *'for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which is to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins,'*⁷ and it has no *Best before...* date either, for he is incorruptible, *'God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.'*⁸ The Eucharist calls us to change and it is also the means by which we begin that change *'because our present perishable nature must put on imperishability and this mortal nature must put on immortality.'*⁹

*'Approach ye then with faithful hearts sincere, and take the safeguard of salvation here. He that in this world rules his saints and shields, to all believers life eternal yields. With heavenly bread makes them that hunger whole, gives living waters to the thirsting soul. Alpha and Omega, to whom shall bow all nations at the Doom, is with us now.'*¹⁰

This inestimable gift that Christ has given to us does not of course come from any human power. It is the work of Christ alone, offered by him to the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, and no human agency can, by itself, procure the Holy Eucharist. Only *'through him, and with him, and in him'*¹¹ can this be achieved and so right and just it is that we mark not only the institution of the Holy Eucharist on this night but the institution of the Sacred Order of the Priesthood also.

In the Preface at the Mass of Priestly Ordination the bishop prays, *'For by the anointing of the Holy Spirit you made your Only Begotten Son High Priest of the new and eternal covenant, and by your wondrous design were pleased to decree that his one Priesthood should continue in the Church. For Christ not only adorns with a royal priesthood the people he has made his own, but with a brother's kindness he also chooses men to become sharers in his sacred ministry through the laying on of hands.'*¹²

As Moses required the help of seventy wise elders to govern and shepherd Israel in the desert so too did God provide through Aaron's sons *'worthy priests in sufficient number for the increasing rites of sacrifice and worship.'*¹³ As the Apostles handed on their ministry as Shepherds of the Flock of Christ to others so too did they in turn appoint co-workers to have care and solicitude for His Body, *'Lord, grant also to us such fellow workers, for we are weak and our need is greater.'*¹⁴

Ordained priest to preach the Gospel the ordinand is also anointed on his hands with the holy oil of chrism, as a sign of his participating in Christ's sacramental priesthood so that Jesus may *'preserve you to sanctify the Christian people and to offer sacrifice to God.'*¹⁵ All priests know that the weakness of their individual humanity is true testimony to the power of Christ's divinity at work in them through the Church. Bread and wine do not occur in nature, they require human hands to be created. So too with the Holy Eucharist, it does not occur in nature either; it too requires human hands but in this case those hands must be consecrated by the power of Christ also.

Nothing has the force to combat evil like the power of Christ's victory over sin and death. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, in which we all participate, has that power and enables the Presence of Christ in his Church in a unique way. Pray please, for your priests and for vocations to the Priesthood so that they may *'renew in his name the sacrifice of human redemption, to set before your children the paschal banquet, to lead your holy people in charity, to nourish them with the word and strengthen them with the Sacraments.'*¹⁶

Finally, imagine, in a flight of fancy, that we could somehow identify the DNA of the Holy Eucharist. Among the many strands that made up its helix not only would we identify the Priesthood as a constituent part but bound up throughout would also run *Agape* - Holy Charity, Christian Love. I noted earlier that the Holy Eucharist has no *Sell by...* or *Best before...* date but I would venture to suggest that it does have a *Use by date...* that is to say, *Use by the hour of your death*, for it cannot be used thereafter. The time will come when we pass from this world and the Sacraments here on earth cease. The world of the flesh and the senses will be gone and we will have no need of earthly things to mediate for us the things of God.

The Eucharist is intended to *'fit us for heaven, to live with thee there.'*¹⁷ Given for us and for our salvation, it is a gift, a treasure that is to be shared, for at its heart it is an offering, freely given and chosen, it is an act of the will, it is an act of Love.

On this night the Church celebrates receiving two commands not one: *'Do this in memory of me,'* as noted earlier, and, *'I give you a new commandment: love one just as I have loved you.'*¹⁸ In truth the two commandments are one, born as they are, in the everlasting fire of the one heart of Eternal Love. In washing the feet of his disciples the Lord showed *'how perfect his love was,'*¹⁹ and, to emphasise that his example must be copied he made it clear to St Peter that not to do so would mean *'you can have no part with me.'*²⁰ The commandment to charity does not follow after the Eucharist; it is at the very heart of it. On a night when we cannot welcome Our Lord sacramentally into our hearts and *'recognise him in the breaking of bread,'*²¹ we can still pray and express our spiritual communion with him and, now more than ever, pray that we recognise and serve him in the weak and the vulnerable for, *'I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'*²² We should pray too that by this fraternal charity our brothers and sisters may see not us but Christ and thereby *'come to know him, love him and serve him in this world and be happy with him in the next.'*²³

*'Our delight, Lord God of hosts, is to sing your praises in this Eucharist; give us, we pray, your strength on our earthly journey that we may find a home at your altar in heaven.'*²⁴

Our Lady of Walsingham, *pray for us.*

St Joseph, *pray for us.*

St Charles Borromeo, *pray for us.*

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

9 April 2020

Maundy Thursday

1. *Introit, Mass of The Lord's Supper, Roman Missal*

2. Exodus 12:11

3. 1 Corinthians 11:26

4. *Suscipe*, Prayer of St Ignatius of Loyola
5. John 6:58
6. Matthew 26:29
7. Matthew 26:28
8. Acts 2:24
9. 1 Corinthians 15:
10. *Sancti venite, Corpus Christi sumite*, Draw nigh and take the Body of the Lord, *Antiphony of Bennchar* (7th century) trans. by J M Neale d. 1866
11. *Doxology*, Eucharistic Prayer, Roman Missal
12. *Preface*, Proper for the Mass of Ordination to the Priesthood, *Roman Pontifical*
13. *Prayer of Consecration*, Ordination to the Priesthood, *Roman Pontifical*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Anointing with Chrism*, Ordination to the Priesthood, *Roman Pontifical*
16. *Preface*, *Loc. cit.*
17. *Away in a manger, verse 3*, J T McFarland, d.1913
18. John 13:34
19. John 13:1
20. John 13:8
21. Luke 24:35
22. Matthew 25:40
23. *The Penny Catechism, question 2*, England & Wales, 1970
24. *Prayer after Communion*, Proper for the Mass of Ordination, *Roman Pontifical*