Maundy Thursday Reflection



On Maundy Thursday I would normally be going to the Cathedral in Hereford for the Chrism Eucharist. This is an annual assembly of all the clergy, readers, ministry teams and the laity to worship together. There are several parts of this service, and it’s one that we all try to get to if at all possible.

The first part of it is that all of us in ministry, lay or ordained, reaffirm our vows. It is an opportunity for renewal of service, and our public joint declaration of this renewal. It is a powerful time, as each group stands up in turn to make our declaration of the service we are called to do in God’s name.

The second is that this is the service in which the oils are blessed by the bishop. Three large containers of olive oil are brought up one by one, usually by three of the most-recently ordained deacons – I was one of these in 2006. One oil is blessed for Christenings; one is blessed for anointing the sick; and the third has balsam added and is blessed for confirmations and ordinations – this is the Oil of Chrism. After the service, clergy from all over the diocese bring their vessels to be filled with the oils to take back to their parishes.

The third thing is that we celebrate the Eucharist: we share together the bread and wine, consecrated by the Bishop in memory of the Last Supper, when Jesus ate the Passover meal with his friends for the last time before he was crucified the next day. ‘Eucharist’ means ‘thanksgiving’; every time we share the bread and wine of the Holy Communion service, we are giving thanks for Jesus crucified, risen and ascended.

It must have been a strange meal, that Last Supper. Passover is a solemnly joyful occasion, telling the story of God’s freeing of His people from captivity and slavery in Egypt – and so remembering His will to free us still from many other kinds of captivity and slavery. But on this occasion, there was an underlying tension: Judas waiting to do his act of betrayal with the kiss of friendship in the Garden of Gethsemane; the other eleven being told they would all run away; Peter being told he would deny three times that he knew Jesus. And these words about the bread and the wine: ‘this is my body – this is my blood’.

In the wilderness, when Jesus was tempted by Satan at the very start of his ministry, the first temptation was to turn stones into bread, for he was hungry. But he quoted the scriptures: ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Father.’ And now Jesus, the ‘Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing’, speaks of the bread as his body. We think of his body, broken like the bread, as he hung on the cross; but we think, too, of how that act of brokenness gives us sustaining nourishment because it is the act of total loving forgiveness.

When Moses brought the tablets of stone down from the mountain at Sinai with the Ten Commandments engraved on them, the people of Israel held a solemn sacrifice. The blood of the sacrificial animals was thrown over the altar and also over the people: blood was symbolic of the life of the animal being sacrificed. So we think of this new sacrifice, of Jesus taking the pain of all our separations from God upon himself, once for all, so that we may come back to His presence with the knowledge of forgiveness; and we drink the wine that represents his blood, his life, ‘poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’.

I shall miss attending the Chrism Eucharist. And, although I have set up a chapel at home for Sunday Communion, I miss the Eucharist that we share together around our churches. But perhaps as we eat a meal today – with someone else, or on our own – we can remember that group of friends sitting down to a celebratory meal together. We can remember the dark shades cast across their joy, as the future suddenly became unfamiliar and threatening. We can remember Jesus, and live through the threatening times towards the light beyond.

*Bless us, O Lord, this holiday weekend, with such fellowship as we can share, with your presence with us, and with a vision of hope for a new start to come. Amen.*

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