

Maundy Thursday: 9 April, 2009  
Ex 12:1-14a; Ps 78  
I Cor 11:23-36; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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IMAGINE, if you will, a world without death. No, really think about it. Who would be in your family? Live in your house? What would you do with your time, if it were endless? Where would you live? How would you decide? The writer Dan Simmons imagines such a world in one of his novels. He envisions a world in which children barely exist, because the fact that nobody dies means there is no space on earth for new lives to be born. On this world, boredom is the ultimate enemy. People fritter away their time on increasingly irrelevant games and high-tech toys and political intrigues, as there is no constraint urging them to achieve something great while they yet walk under the sun. Enormous amounts of money are expended on trying to look young, well into your five hundredth year; cosmetic surgeries and treatments abound. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that this discovery of endless life in this world has crippled the imaginations and moral capacities of its people; freed from death, they still fear it. Finally, God sends a messiah to try to break them into a different way of being -- a young woman who, unlike everyone around her, chooses voluntarily to die.<sup>1</sup>

Maundy Thursday was Christ's last attempt, in this life, to help his disciples enter a new way of being. Six days before the Passover, Jesus had eaten a dinner at the home of Mary and of Martha, and of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. While they were there, "Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair." (John 12:3) It was an act of extravagant tenderness, a grateful outpouring of the heart from a woman whose brother had been brought to life again. Traditional commentators have seen her action as an anointing for death; certainly, Jesus would have seen it in this light, even though Mary would not have known what was going to happen. But I suspect that Jesus saw more to it than that: less than a week before he was going to be treated with unimaginable cruelty, Mary honored him with the gift of her love. She abased herself for him, poured out the best that she had and was, gave of the very hairs of her head so that he would know she treasured him. That balm must have reached from Christ's feet to his heart, must have comforted him with the knowledge that all was not lost; whatever horrors he was going to have to endure, there would also be the memory of friendship.

And so, six days later, he tied a towel around his waist, knelt at the feet of his friends, and bathed them as Mary had bathed his, wiping them with the towel; gently, tenderly, wiping those feet which had traveled so many miles with him on dusty roads, which would travel so many hundreds of miles more to spread the news of his resurrection and keep his work alive. But Peter reacted with horror: "You will never wash my feet!", for what Christ was doing simply wasn't done. In the old order, teachers and rulers did not abase themselves before their students or subjects. Authority was given all the trappings of power: good seats, long robes, jubilant parades, inscriptions carved on fountains. If the image you project was the person you were, then Jesus had just taken on the identity of one who was beneath a slave, for even a slave could not be ordered to wash feet. But Jesus insists, "Unless I wash you, you have no share in me." (John 13:8)

Jesus is enacting in his abasement what he could not achieve with all the power of God. Over and over, God had called to his people: "Walk in my ways. Love one another. Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) And yet, God spoke as if in a still, small voice which no one would hear or heed. Tonight, Jesus kneels, bows himself into a place of weakness, and compels his disciples to play the game his way, or not at all. Unless I wash you, you have no share in me. And we, who so often chafe at the constraints of power, are defenceless against the vulnerability of love. Headstrong Peter submits to Christ's will, utterly, completely: "Lord, not my feet only, but also my

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Simmons, *The Hyperion* trilogy.

hands and my head!" (John 13:9) In this world which Christ is struggling to bring in, the careful distance of hierarchy is replaced by the willing gift of love. He is giving them the gift that he had received: a memory of divine tenderness to shelter them from the losses to come and to draw them back to him even after they had deserted him.

And having bent his disciples thus far to his will, Christ takes them back to revisit the most awkward and discouraging incident in his ministry. Early in his teaching, when Jesus had begun to attract great crowds, he spoke to them, saying, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6:51) The crowds react in horror, fearing that he is urging them toward cannibalism: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:52) And when Jesus insists, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you," most of them leave, until Jesus is left to stare forlornly at the twelve and ask, "Do you also wish to go away?" But Peter had answered, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:67-68)

Tonight, Christ lives into his promise, or dies into it. Seating them at table, he takes bread and wine, blesses them, gives it to them, and says, "This is my body, which is given for you... This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:19-20) The surprising thing is that these two moments take place in different gospels. John gives us the washing of the feet. Matthew, Mark, and Luke give us the bread and wine. Together, they show us two different forms of self-giving love: the life of patient and tender service, and the sacramental gift of grace which nourishes us to serve. Together, they show us the full action of God in us, God bringing about Godself in us, breaking us into God's way of being.

But this love comes at a cost. The Passover is an ambiguous feast, for even while they celebrate the redemption of Israel from slavery, the worshipers remember the price that was paid: every first-born in Egypt, of humankind and of beast; the anguished cries of every mother and father and sister and brother and wife and child in all the land of Egypt. Think of the faces of those who were hunting through the rubble in Italy this week; think of a whole country of faces like theirs; and then you will know the cost of that freedom. The cost of your freedom. For the truth is that, just as those deaths meant life for the Hebrews, so Christ's death means life for you and for me.

A number of years ago, my Aunt Donna was diagnosed with kidney failure. She was a young woman, in her fifties, but she expected that she would live the rest of her life tethered to a dialysis machine. After two years, she received exciting news: a kidney was available, and it had been set aside for her. I do not need to tell you of the rush to the hospital, of how quickly she dropped everything in her life to travel to where the kidney was, of how eagerly she embraced that chance to have fulness of life again. But now, a decade later, whenever she holds her grandchildren in her lap or walks along the street in the sun, she knows that her life came at a cost, that she carries within her the very organ of a stranger whose death meant life to her.

The tenderness we have received from others is the tenderness we received from God on this Passover. The life we carry in our bodies is the life of his Body and Blood. The love we give to one another is love Christ's gift has brought forth in us. Christ was able to make that gift because he knew who he was, and whose. St. John writes, "during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table...and...began to wash the disciples' feet." (John 13:2-5) Jesus had nothing to prove to anyone, not even to himself, because he knew that he was of God. There was no one who could take that from him, no action of service, however menial, which could debase him, for his worth was grounded in God.

And so is ours. When Jesus looks at Peter and says, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand," it is this he means. (John 13:7) Yes, the disciples do not understand the foot-washing. Yes, they do not yet understand the world he is trying to help them enter. Yes, they do

not know, as Jesus does, that Jesus is about to die. But what they will understand when they understand all these things is nothing less than the unfailing love of God, who created them and us because God wants us to exist, loves us without ceasing, and has poured out upon us a gift worth even more than all the offerings we can bring.

During the first World War, the poet Humbert Wolfe imagined the shades of young soldiers walking together:

They are speaking together of what they loved in vain here,  
but the air is too thin to carry the thing they say.

They were young and golden, but they came on pain here,  
and their youth is age now, their gold is grey.

Yet their hearts are not changed, and they cry to one another,

'What have they done with the lives we laid aside?

Are they young with our youth, gold with our gold, my brother?

Do they smile in the face of death, because we died?'<sup>2</sup>

Their questions are for all of us, who have come from God and are going to God again. What have you done with the life Christ laid aside? Can you smile in face of death, because he died? If tonight were your last supper, if you were going to God tonight, whom would you love? Whom would you forgive? Why don't you, now, today?

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<sup>2</sup> Humbert Wolfe, "The Soldier," 1916.