

# *Maundy Thursday*

The Evening of the Lord's Supper has always seemed to me the most mysterious of all the times of the Church. We are now in that astonishing opening-up of time where we leave behind the limitations of every day, our tyrannical cage of date and hour and place.

What we call ordinary life, in its killing repetitiveness, its overwhelming routine, lulls us into half-life and unhealthy torpor. But not all life is like that. Some things have happened to us all that have broken the spell, and revealed the truth, and changed our life and our direction. Tonight I am haunted by the people whose devastation I have shared, as a family member, as a friend, and as a priest, because this is their night. Even if some of these experiences have been terrible in their impact, devastating in their effect on our plans, they are life-giving moments for us to treasure. If life sometimes comes as fulfilment, more often it comes in the wrecking of our designs; the life we are destined for is greater far than we are able to imagine. It shows its advent when our plans are shattered in its favour.

By now the little band of the disciples knows this experience well. They have been with Jesus long enough to be dominated by his mystery. They have learned to keep silence before him, they have known what it was to be afraid to ask. But never has there been an atmosphere among them of such portent, such destiny.

It is nearly Passover, in the city of Jerusalem, and their Master has warned them over and over again that his path will end in apocalypse, in destruction. He has drawn no limits to this cataclysm: even the Temple will not survive the Day he is contemplating. Now he is speaking about the Hour having struck, he is speaking of glory and departure, of a time of great trial, a time when their own faith will be annihilated.

We have from this night two signs: the Holy Eucharist, and the Washing of Feet. In these two actions Jesus has buried the meaning of his death. They are not trivial performances with a single easy meaning. They are deep symbols, shot through with subconscious and supernatural power. They are vehicles which take us away from that dull world to which we have allotted a dull meaning, into a new world where the irruption of divine judgment menaces the Tower of Babel, where human judgment will be overwhelmed, and the voice of God will decree our liberation from slavery, a new humanity in a new Creation. As Jesus delivers himself into the hands of evil men, he will walk the last mile with the condemned world, and will offer himself to die its death for it, the last of the enslaved, the lowest of the condemned.

Now, in this Supper, by his two great signs, he will teach us to look deeper into his mystery, and, by seeking for the meaning of his last free deeds, to find the mystery of his Way of the Cross. Gracefully he lays aside the place of honour, gracefully he does the work of one lower than a slave. Later you will understand. Breaking the bread, he will offer you his body as your food, his blood as your drink. Later you will understand.

The intimacy of the Supper will never pass away, and everything that follows, in the rest of your life, will be illuminated by these signs.