

# The Supper of the Lord

The falling of this night is a signal for us to turn our minds to the preparation of a sacrifice. The first reading gave us minute prescriptions for the choice of the Paschal Lamb; and I recall the words of Isaiah, about that mysterious Servant, whom God calls

*My Chosen One, in whom my soul delights*

a line echoed in the story of Jesus' Baptism:

*my Son, the Beloved, on whom my favour rests*

and which the Baptist amplifies in the Fourth Gospel as

*the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sin*

This Paschal Lamb is to be *kept until the day decreed* for its killing, and then it is to be made ready for the Paschal Meal, which will unite and demarcate the whole people of God; this solemn commandment perfectly prefigures the Eucharist: these are meals commanded by God, and our obedience to the commands of God makes his word flesh; so the Hebrews ate according to the command, and found themselves living,

*not by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*

The falling of this night was predicted by Jesus. It is the night of his Last Supper. The Gospel story of this Supper is very precious; in the deep, confused currents that flowed around and within the thirteen who shared it, there is *nothing* we can afford to ignore - as, at the Eucharist, there is nothing in us that is irrelevant to what we are doing.

Gathered in faith, we eat and drink eternal life; gathered in sin, we eat and drink damnation. The question is to me: how have I come to this table? When the Gospel tonight gives us Peter, it gives us, not a canonised saint, seated at the table of the Messiah in the Kingdom of Heaven, but a weak man with no idea that he is on the threshold of his greatest experience of failure, which will also bring him, with bitterest tears, his first knowledge of salvation. Jesus says truly:

*Now you do not understand what I am doing, but later you will understand.*

This is the ignorance to which Peter confesses, saying: *I tell you, I do not know the man.* Equally, when it gives us Judas, the Gospel does not want us to exercise the usual prurient curiosity about what became of him, but to recognise in him a part of our mixed selves, a part of what the real Church is. The Last Supper is not past tonight, but present; and we are among those who share in it, a glorious and shameful company. Peter is here tonight, and so is Judas: Jesus washes the feet of both.

What is the heart of the mystery we celebrate tonight? You expect me to say, *the Eucharist*, and that cannot be wrong. You might notice, however, that the Gospel is *not* the account of the Eucharist, but of the washing of feet; and this may lead us to an answer that is even greater than the Eucharist. Remembering that we are in the hour of Jesus, towards which he, and all his people, have been journeying for so long, we can discern a huge act of God unfolding, a deed of such enormity that we can only catch confused and partial glimpses of it: I mean the handing-over of the Son by the Father, the ultimate gift of God to the world. It

is to this immense divine act that Jesus' deeds bear witness at the Last Supper, where, in his last hours of freedom, he gives us images that will only be understood when we see Good Friday unfold, and stand in that trauma which silences kings. Tonight, already he is handing himself over, in accordance with the will of the Father, and the washing of feet, the breaking of bread and the passing of the cup are all signs which can only be read or understood in the light of the Cross. Even the Cross is only to be understood in the light of Jesus' mind; and Jesus' mind is only to be understood by the mind of God the Father.

So what we are remembering tonight is exactly what they were, and we are: a gathering of ignorant people, almost silent around a leader in whom we sense unreachable heights of destiny, unspeakable mysteries of obedience, secrets that cannot be expressed in human words. We know that these things, beyond our comprehension, yet involve us and our lives as nothing else ever has. We accept him as he does the work that is lower than the work of a slave, as he speaks to us of the gift of his flesh and blood, and the necessity of our receiving such a gift. And of course, we do not understand; but we know that we will do this in memory of him, and the words and the actions are burned into our minds, and the Church that is constituted in communion with this night comes into being, awaiting the hour of its enlightenment, when we know him, risen, in the breaking of the bread.