

The gathering in the upper room which we recreate this evening is hardly a very distinguished one in worldly terms. As far as we know, it was made up of a crowd of country bumpkins up in the big city for the national feast. Their conversation would have been carried on in broad Northern accents, probably laced with a good helping of that special vocabulary that sailors and fishermen have. There is also their leader, who is certainly the heart of what's happening, and who is certainly someone very special; and we know there was another friend of his next to him, whose name we aren't told. This man's account of what happened has come down to us in stupendous prose which makes this meal perhaps the most influential meeting ever held; it has been re-enacted in memory of its host on every scrap of land where people live, over the succeeding twenty centuries, by people who have found in it the meaning of their lives and deaths; indeed, we can say that the Mass is a life-and-death business, and people have died for its meaning in this very country not so very long ago. So don't let familiarity blunt our sensitivity to what we're about.

The host has given selflessly to everyone he has met, and he has transformed their lives. Now he uses this meal to tell his friends about his death. He does this in several ways, as if one way alone isn't enough; of course it isn't. Human beings can't talk about death easily at the best of times; and this man is surrounded by so many currents of feeling and action that his best friends say that they have no idea what is happening, that they are frankly at a loss. In John's Gospel we hear Thomas' troubled voice speaking for all: *We don't know where you are going; how can we know the way?* - and the level reply is recorded: *I am the way, and the truth, and the life.* That request for complete trust from people who don't know what's happening is the only guide they are offered. Trust in God still, and trust in me.

In the last supper Jesus tells his friends clearly that he will die, that he will die betrayed, and that the traitor is among them tonight. So Jesus, being at this moment perfectly free, is fully aware that he is about to lose his freedom and his life. What's about to happen is therefore no accident. Sin is present at the supper, resting its hand on the table, dipping its hand in the dish. Eternal love is at the supper, consenting, and accepting all that will come.

Then Jesus does a work that is beneath slavery, washing their feet. Feet bear the marks and calluses of life and labour; they aren't our most beautiful or most dignified members. They are on the ground, and whoever washes them must be on the ground too. Jesus has never stopped his downward journey from the glory of God to the depths of the earth. He shows his disciples that no depth of servitude will rob him of his love for them or his freedom. He will still be loving, and still be free, when he is arrested, tried, condemned, and crucified. Sin will be present in his dying, and he will bear all the sins of the world in his own body.

Then he gives them another sign, based on their sharing of the table. Food is life; but the labour for food is part of the curse of Adam. So food is a dual symbol; and in the forming of bread and wine there is destruction as well as creativity: the taking and crushing of grain and grape weave death into the giving of life, and the breaking of bread and pouring out of wine invite to the table the knowledge of violence and loss.

For you, Jesus breaks and pours the bread, the wine, the body and the blood. So he takes the companionship of the table to new depths, and - because of who he is - to the depths of God. In the gift of the body and the shedding of the blood we will find our sinful nature turned to gift, turned to sacrifice, transformed in reconciliation, made a place of utter divine love. When we eat this bread, and drink this cup, we proclaim his death for us, his selfless gift which changes the nature of all human flesh and blood.

Suddenly our earth - and we who are of the dust of the earth - both shine with the meaning of eternity. We are touching with our hands the Word who is life, even as he gives, and serves, and pours himself out for unknowing, undeserving, unclean and thankless people. He charts all human love with a new and unbreakable covenant, especially when it is unknown, unappreciated, unrequited, by any answering human heart. Let us recognise him in the breaking of the bread, and know ourselves and our calling for the first time.