

# Sermon for King's College Chapel, Maundy Thursday 5 April 2012

## What Is Handed Over

Texts: 1 Cor 11:23-26, John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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*'As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'.*

This solemn night we gather to remember what has been handed over. Paul reminds his readers of the tradition that he received about Jesus' last night with his disciples. Having received it, he in turn *handed it over* to the church in Corinth, the readers to whom he is now writing. He is speaking of the transmission of an early and priceless tradition: the memory of Jesus' final meal. Jesus' actions that night burned into the memory of Jesus' followers; he spoke strange, unforgettable words, foreshadowing his own death. And the earliest witnesses passed these memories along to Paul. Paul does not keep the memories as hidden treasure for himself. He stretches out his hands to hand it on—by retelling the story.

The beginning of the story contains a play on words that is lost in English translations that say, 'on the night when he was *betrayed*'. This is a misleading translation. Paul never refers to the story of Judas' betrayal of Jesus; he has something else in mind: not the betrayal of Jesus by any human agent, but rather *God's* action of handing Jesus over to death. Paul describes God's action with exactly the same verb he used to describe his handing on of tradition earlier in the same sentence. So, to translate literally, 'For I received from the Lord what I also *handed over* to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was *handed over* took bread....' When we remember, then, what has been handed over, we will recall not only the words of the transmitted tradition but also Jesus himself as the one who was *handed over*—handed over by God for our sake. As Paul writes in the eighth chapter of Romans, 'He who did not withhold his own Son, but *handed him over* for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?' (Rom 8.32). That is what we are summoned to remember.

Remembering is a subversive communal activity in an age that coaxes us to drift in the constantly streaming, twittering present, forgetful of history, forgetful of the past. But Paul reminds us: Jesus urged us to break the bread and share the cup as an act of remembrance, remembering his own death. His words and actions evoked Israel's ancient Passover tradition. In the heart of Exodus 12, in the institution narrative of the Passover, God instructs

Moses: 'This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance'. When Israel celebrates the night of Passover, year after year, they remember that God remembered their suffering and acted to set them free. And so, likewise, when we remember the night in which Jesus was handed over, we recall God's mysterious act of deliverance, God's breaking in to our history of slavery to set us free.

But why is Paul reminding the Corinthians of the story of the night when God handed over Jesus for our sake? And why are we remembering that story here tonight?

Paul is not writing simply to instruct the Corinthians about Eucharistic theology; he is addressing a specific pastoral problem in the fledgling church at Corinth. His recounting of the story of Jesus' last meal occurs in the midst of a passage in which he is scolding his readers for being a divided and contentious community, a community in which the wealthier members humiliate the poorer members and leave them hungry and thirsty, even when the church gathers for its common meal. And so, he observes with sad irony, 'when you come together, it is not really the *Lord's* supper that you're eating'.

How could the wealthier and more privileged Corinthians have supposed themselves justified in observing status distinctions and consuming all the best food and wine, while leaving little for others? They were simply carrying on normal social practices of their time and culture. If that seems strange to us, we might pause to consider our own social practices: think, for example, of the passengers in first class on an airliner, sipping champagne and eating a hot dinner, while the passengers in coach have Coke and pretzels. However it came about, some Corinthians were priding themselves on status distinctions and shaming others.

That is why Paul asks them to reconsider their selfish and contentious actions by remembering the night on which Jesus was handed over. Jesus' words and actions on that night signified that he was in fact handing himself over to death for our sake, handing himself over as broken bread to be consumed by us in a new feast that unites us all.

So Paul retells the remembered tradition, and then he adds his own pithy commentary to sum up its meaning: '*...As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*'. The sharing of the bread and wine is itself the proclamation. The Authorised Version that was read a few moments ago makes the point well: 'For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do *shew* the Lord's death till he come'. If we truly share with one another, we *show* the Lord's self-giving. We show what it means to be handed over. The Supper that we share is an enacted parable—like Jesus' action of stripping

off his clothes and washing the feet of his disciples. He who formed humankind out of the dust of the ground now kneels naked before us in a wet towel to wash off the dust of our feet. That is what this evening proclaims; that is what we remember. And that is what our common meal embodies.

So, no more strife and rivalry, no more shunning the poor and weak. No more amnesia about the night when Jesus was handed over. If we remember the Lord's death, we will live in responsive gratitude for the Lord's generosity by handing our own lives over, and sharing generously with our brothers and sisters in the new covenant.

When we remember the Lord's death, we suddenly see that Jesus' act of footwashing, like his self-emptying death on a cross, comes into focus as a revelation of the true character of God. God hands himself over to us and for us. And so the bread and wine that we share tonight invite us to remember, and to hand ourselves over. In so doing, we faithfully proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.