

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

Last Supper: Last Lesson in Discipleship

Considered in human terms, it was the worst sort of special occasion. The host, our Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that it was to be his last meal with his friends, had thought it all through: he was going to say a few words and make a few gestures that would define his relationship with his friends, and clarify how he wanted them to continue after he had gone. Bread and wine were passed around the table - 'share these in memory of me; when you do so, I shall be with you, just as I am now'. And, according to the beloved disciple, St John, who tells us nothing of the bread and wine, Jesus girded himself with a towel and washed his disciples' feet and said, 'I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.'

Humanly speaking, Jesus' intentions and ambitions were clear. This was not only the Last Supper, but the last lesson in discipleship: a lesson in generosity and humility. It was to clarify that 'service' was the name of Jesus' game. He was taking forward the golden rule - 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you'; and remaining faithful to the ancient Hebrew teaching that he had already reiterated many times: 'Love God and love your neighbour as yourself'.

'Generosity', 'humility', 'service', 'love': these words describe Jesus' demeanour and intention at the Last Supper. Sadly, however, we need a completely different set of words to describe the behaviour and attitude of the disciples; the uncomfortable guests at this occasion that Jesus had so carefully set up.

In this regard, the Last Supper is like a play or film where the family are gathered to hear a will read. As the lawyer reads it out, all are disappointed in different ways, so that an already difficult family dynamic becomes impossibly fractious and tense. It is a tragedy because the departed person's will is thwarted, just as it is declared.

Jesus intends his friends to be generous, humble, serving and loving, but instead they are bemused and disloyal, and turn to gossip and a dispute about who is the greatest. In John's account there is the misplaced dialogue with

Peter, where first he refuses to have his feet washed and then asks to be completely bathed.

As we remember Jesus' Last Supper, we might conclude that in many ways the disciples were not ready for this moment; they were not prepared for this set of personal challenges; that they were simply not ready to receive the gift of bread and wine as body and blood. Their minds were resolutely set on lower things, whether the lower matter of betrayal or the lower matter of fussing about who was, in some petty sense, superior to the others.

Such spiritual and relational failure is all too easy to imagine. Which is perhaps why, when we gather at the Lord's Table and remember this astonishingly challenging occasion, we say

We do not presume
to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in thy manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy so much
as to gather up the crumbs under thy table.

Our unworthiness all too often consists in our similarity to those first disciples in their confused, disloyal, gossipy disputation. Like them, we find it impossibly difficult to shed all that and to adopt the Christ-like virtues of generosity, humility, service and love.

Let us, therefore, approach the sacrament of Christ's enduring and transforming love, not only with the familiar acknowledgment of our unworthiness, but also with a fervent prayer, that by sharing in this generously-provided meal we may grow in generosity, develop in humility, live lives dedicated to the service of others and mature into the same self-giving love as God in Christ has shown to us in this most life-giving gift of Holy Communion.

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1 Corinthians 11.17-end; Luke 22.14-30
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