

Maundy Thursday 2020

I welcome everyone who is joining us; *however* you are joining us, here at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in St. John's as five worshippers, representing the whole Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador gather for this Renewal of Ordination Vows, Blessing of Oils, and Ante-Communion. Today "Ante" is spelled A-N-T-E not A-N-T-I- and means "before" or "preceding," and not "against" or "opposed." We celebrate Ante-Communion, interrupting the liturgy before the consecration of bread and wine, because we choose not to celebrate the complete Service of Holy Communion during this time of global pandemic. As difficult as that is for some of us, it seems most prudent right now in order to protect everyone.

Today we are aware of a deep absence in our life as Christians for it is in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist that we are joined with our Lord in the deepest way. On that first Maundy Thursday Jesus told his disciples to "Do this in remembrance of me" and simple elements of bread and wine became his body and blood, broken and shared. But today our union with him must be without that great sacrament of the altar and, from that, arises a great longing. Absence, in a peculiar way, can have a presence all of its own, sometimes expressed in that old expression, "You don't know what you have until it's gone."

Today, we know only too well what we do not have. For not only is our Holy Eucharist incomplete, our little community of worshippers is limited to five, although that number is multiplied many times by those are joining through their computer screens. Today is the day the clergy of our diocese would gather with their bishop to renew their ordination vows and some of their number would have their feet washed by the bishop to recall Jesus' actions in washing the feet of his disciples on the night before he died. That night he gave them a "new commandment" that they were to love one another. By washing their feet Jesus showed them the nature of that servant-love, that servant-discipleship. The washing of feet will also be absent from our liturgy today. And the clergy will remember that following our liturgy many of us would share lunch together but that too will be denied to us today. The list grows. But not everything will be absent.

We are left today with the Liturgy of the Word, the Renewal of Ordination Vows, and the Blessing of Oils. Almost all who are sharing in this worship do so from a distance. Our Jewish brothers and sisters know all about worshipping from a distance. They have a very ancient addition to their prayers at the end of the Passover Seder meal celebrated about this time. That addition is the words, "Next year in Jerusalem." During those long centuries of diaspora when most Jews lived far from Jerusalem, in those words – "Next year in Jerusalem" – they expressed a deep longing for their holy city and their fervent desire to return there once more.

We gather here, in this way, with our own deep longing for our holy places and we pray in hope, not with the words, "Next year in Jerusalem," but with our own plea, "Next year in Heart's Delight, Next year in Hillview, Next year in Upper Island Cove, Next year in Cartwright, Next year in Labrador City, Next year in Topsail, Next year in Bell Island, Next year in Mount Pearl, Next year in St. John's." In our worship today is a profound desire, arising out of a profound absence, that one day, perhaps this year, perhaps next year, things will be set right again.

Our hearts are filled today with desire for a new beginning when all of this is behind us. But our hearts are also filled today with memories of the past, before this change came into our lives. Hope and memory come together powerfully for us at this time as we feel both absence and presence.

For me, The Liturgy of Maundy Thursday has it all. We learn of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist and we learn of Jesus in the washing of his disciples' feet. Jesus shows us a new way to commune with him and his Father in Heaven, and links that new way with servanthood. Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave the bread and wine, and then knelt in humility to wash the feet of those near him. This was a powerful memory that would shape everyone who witnessed it. And in the memory of that night Jesus would come to them again and again:

“Do this in memory of me.”

“Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another.”

This was how they would remember Jesus after he was no longer with them as he used to be.

For Jesus, his final evening with his disciples was to be one where he gave them a memory to carry with them until the end of their lives. And those disciples have passed on to us 20 centuries later that same memory:

“Do this in memory of me.”

“Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another.”

How would you like to be remembered when you're gone?

How would you like to be thought of by those who knew you, and those who will come after you?

All of us, I would suggest, want to be remembered favorably. All of us would like to be remembered with love by our family and friends.

We have all have seen this process of remembering many times in our pastoral ministries. It always happens whenever a family comes together to bid good-bye to a member, and whenever friends gather to pay their respects to a colleague no longer with them.

Usually at those times there are many feelings to be revealed, many stories to be shared, many experiences to be recalled. All of these actions can be very therapeutic if they help those experiencing the loss to accept it and gradually come to terms with it. These actions also attach value to the life that is passed and are a way of giving thanks for that life.

This morning we gather as a different sort of family to remember.

We remember the one who is both absent and present at the same time. We remember Jesus and his promise to be with us until the end of time. To help us remember we listen to the words of Holy Scripture, we pray, we sing, and in a more normal time we would share bread and wine. All of this helps us to remember that night of the Passover Meal, the night before Jesus died, when he gathered with his friends and left them with a memory. That night, over that meal, they would have remembered their journey together with Jesus over the past year or two and there would have been much sharing of stories and feelings. But Jesus, knowing that his hour had come, wanted his friends to remember him in a special way. He left them with a memory of words and of actions:

“Do this in memory of me.”

“Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another.”

This morning Jesus calls us, a late band of his disciples, to remember this, and more besides, as we recall the events of that first Maundy Thursday. And do you know where the name, "Maundy Thursday" comes from? It comes from the Latin term, *mandatum novum*, meaning, "a new commandment" which is precisely what Jesus says in the 34th verse of the 13th chapter of John's Gospel. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you."

And even though we can't join with Jesus and with each other in the ways we want to, our memories are being stirred up like never before and our hearts are burning with a great longing ... next year, next year, next year ...

I remember a little boy in one of my parishes from long ago who came home from school one day to some fresh gingerbread that his mother had baked for him. He sat down at the table and she served him a piece and gave him a glass of milk and he began to eat. Three or four bites into his slice of gingerbread he suddenly began to cry. His mother came and sat close and asked him what was wrong. He said he was crying because he remembered all of the times he shared a piece of gingerbread with his grandfather who also loved gingerbread. Sadly, his grandfather had died just a few months earlier and the taste of gingerbread had stirred up a powerful memory in that little boy, a memory of someone he loved and who loved him. And in the taste of gingerbread was the bitter reminder of one who was no longer there as he used to be.

In absence there can be a profound presence and we feel it acutely today as we are denied the sharing of bread and wine at the altar, yet in that need we feel the presence of the One who has always joined us at that table.

A Godly Play story that comes after Easter is called, Knowing Jesus in a New Way ... and includes these words: "They could feel Jesus' presence in his absence ..."

And even though Jesus does not come to us in the bread and the wine to share our meal as we remember, and perhaps we even remember through tears today like that little boy, our Lord is still with us ... for he has promised that whenever two or three are gathered in his name he will also be there.

We remember his promise at this moment. We hear him say:

Remember me

Do all of this often in memory of me

And whenever you do, I will always be with you

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)