

Then He Withdrew

Maundy Thursday, Year B, 3/ 28/ 24

It's funny how things happen, and what gets remembered. From that Last Supper long ago come down to us most prominently the Eucharist, the ritual meal that grew from it. "Whenever you eat and drink these things, do so in memory of me?" "Was ever another command so obeyed?" Dom Gregory Dix, a prominent historian of liturgies and the Eucharist, famously wrote.¹ All the gospels speak of it; the Gospel itself depends on it. Take, eat; this is my body. Drink this, all of you; this is my blood. Given for you. Shed for you. Always remember, and never forget.

Art follows the life of faith, especially when there's no safer topic to put on canvas, table, or wall. I suspect that there are few images more reproduced or recognizable than Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, set so finely on the wall of the nuns' refectory of Santa Maria della Grazie in Milano, upon a gesso ground. Hail Mary, full of grace. Oh, to dine in such company.

They recently restored that mural, btw., showing not only the bread and the wine, but the well-cleaned feet of which John's gospel speaks. "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me" Jesus said (John 13:8b). Ritual purification, the scholars tell us, not hygiene. Then again, in the restored Da Vinci, you sure can see how clean everyone's feet are.

Church and art have made less frequent recourse, for some reason, to the bulk of what goes on at that dinner: Jesus's final lessons for his closest followers. The lectionary gives us some of it, but not all. It would take no more time to read than a run-through of the Passion Narrative, and less than reading the whole *megillah* of

¹ Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, new ed., Continuum 2005 (orig. 1945).

Esther as is done on the Feast of Purim, but we don't. Not even when dining beneath reproductions of *The Last Supper*, or when we've reimagined the Maundy service to be as ours is now. We wash one another's hands, for hygiene as well as ritual purification, in service to one another in a way that makes sense today. We focus on what Jesus says and what he actually does: feed people with real food that is also spiritual food. "Take eat, this is my body," but also, "Take eat, this is really good bread." Nourish your bodies as you nourish your souls. Whenever you eat bread, remember me. Also do that whenever you drink wine. Or anything, really. Remember me.

In Jesus's discourse at the Last Supper we find such key teachings as "Love one another as I have loved you," "I am the vine and you are the branches," and "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." It's the heart of Jesus's message and what he wanted most of all: that people would do this and tell everyone to do this, and why. It's now or never, folks; everything's different now. The kingdom of heaven is among you. The kingdom of God is within you. A new day is dawning, unlike the old. Are you ready?

I hope so; it won't be repeated. Why not? Because I – Jesus, that is – am leaving. Where? You know where. Why? You know why. By this point, even the disciples least willing to accept what was happening had to face it: he'd come not to rule but to die. That's why, when the dinner was over and the talking all done, he withdrew.

We don't celebrate this much in our liturgies, either. Oh, some folks keep vigil after Maundy Thursday, try to keep awake for one hour, one bitter watch of the night, as the disciples could not – not after a meal with all that bread and wine. None of us does so by doing as he did – Jesus, that is. He prayed as he'd never prayed before. "Father, please, pretty please, pretty please with sugar on top: let this cup pass from me." The cross, that is, Isaiah's very cup of trembling, not the cup he shared with his

friends. It's not part of our weekly liturgy, a procession to the garden or the churchyard while the cleric prays that God will spare their life, please, please? Perhaps it should be. Art does it justice, from time to time. There are many paintings of the Agony in the Garden, if not quite so many as for the Annunciation, the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, or the Resurrection. Some of them are good, though kitsch springs eternal in this as in all things Christian. Often, there are angels. They, too, see him in anguish or resignation, in stiff-upper-lip tough-guy grace under fire, or whining and wailing that he can't take the pain. What has he done to deserve this? even Pilate will ask. What evil has he done? They all know, as God knows: none. None at all.

"Yet not my will, but Thine be done," Jesus concludes, resigned to what he cannot avoid. We don't do this, not really. Well, sometimes we do. We accept what we cannot change, love a fate we cannot avoid. Sometimes, though, we beg to be spared it, as Jesus did. Often, we get the same response he did: Silence. The awful realization that God is not going to answer our prayers, not with anything more than we've already been given. The pain we can feel in that silence we hear, though, can be all too real. "Thy will, not mine."

That's what he heard, kneeling in the garden, in agony, bleeding into his own sweat: silence, nothing. God has nothing more to say to him. The first humans had heard the voice of God in another garden, the Garden of Eden, of earthly paradise, way back at the beginning, but they chose to ignore it. Once God had dealt with them for this, given them the curses they would forever after live by, and cast them out of paradise, God had nothing more to say to them, either. To their murderous son God speaks, if only to chastise and to curse him. To the first man and first woman, wrestling with sweat and tears their bread from the ground and giving birth only with great pain, God says nothing. Silence is all they heard, and their lives never got better. Freedom they'd wanted and freedom they got. Don't worry: you folks'll never hear from Me again.

Yet God did not utterly forsake them, or us. Prophets, martyrs, monarchs, judges, priests and pillars of fire and cloud all came to heal us, except they didn't work. After drowning most of them and starting over with Noah and his brood, God tried, but – no other way to say it – God failed. God could not reconcile Themselves to Their people without becoming as they were, as God had made them be, both in making them as They did and in forcing them to live free of Them as They did next. The only solution God could think of was to become one of them and live a fully human life. God did so up to the point where that life needed God to save it, at which point God did nothing. God showed Godself the same silence They should Adam and Eve. God abandoned Themselves in the person of Their Son to death until the lesson sank in: this is what it is like to live without love, without hope, and without connection to their source. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus would cry, at the last, as he very nearly did in the garden. He would die and he knew it – though God could put a stop to that at any time; he knew that, too. He would be killed. He had to be. Why? Because God had to know what it felt like to die – and what it meant to die. In order to reconcile humanity to Godself, God had to know this.

When he withdrew to the garden, Jesus still wondered whether that was so, whether he *had* to die, painfully, tomorrow. When he was done kneeling and praying and begging, he had a better sense of why. He knew why there was no shortcut or work-around, why he'd have to go through it all. Feel what it is like when We don't, God may have said to him. We need you to do this for both of Us, and for all those whom we love as well.

This cup will not pass from you. Our will, not thine, be done. Try not to forget that, ever. *Amen.*