

Maundy Thursday 2024 - Jesus, The Bread & The Wine

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Date: 28 March 2024

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[0 : 00] So today it's that part of Holy Week where we really slow down and start to live the last events in Jesus's life as though they're happening now.

Because in some ways they are. God's time is so different to our time. God is still being in the world, crucified and resurrected every day. And especially tonight we're going to explore the tradition of communion or thanksgiving associated with that last meal of Jesus's.

I think the best place to start with this is always by looking at the clip and seeing what Jesus said.

So we're going to start by watching that. This is the version from Matthew's Gospel. On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?

He replied, Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, The teacher says, My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.

So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the twelve.

[1 : 19] And while they were eating, he said, Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me. They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, Surely you don't mean me, Lord.

Jesus replied, The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.

The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man. It would be better for him if he had not been born.

Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi. Jesus answered, You have said so.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, Take and eat.

[2 : 38] This is my body. Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, Drink from it, all of you.

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. It's a story that starts, like Jesus' whole life, in a really human mess.

There's betrayal, fear, and upset. It starts in a very earthly place, you might say, with an atmosphere of anxiety and an overshadowing of violence, in a mess of relationships, where Jesus is about to be betrayed by a close friend.

And this follows so closely after Palm Sunday, where Jesus marched in, and the people shouted, Hosanna, which means save us. And you'd think they got it, but they hadn't, because what they believed was that Jesus would lead a violent and bloody rebellion to overthrow the oppression of the colonizing Roman Empire.

[4 : 10] So you have that fear and that anxiety and a dark cloud of violence hanging overhead. Jesus is about to be hurt in one of the worst ways, betrayed by a close friend.

It looks like things are going really well after the glorious parade at Palm Sunday, but in the midst of people shouting Hosanna, they fall foul of recasting God in their image, trying to stop seeing the God who offers the road to heaven and instead see something we're much more comfortable, a violent leader.

And in some ways, they were so close to getting it right, so close to recognizing Jesus as the Messiah who came to set them free from tyranny and slavery. But Jesus came to show them God's way, God's path to freedom, which is frustratingly never quite like ours.

It transcends possibilities that we can imagine, speaks beyond the limits of our small, brutal human understanding to point us towards God and heaven. And in all this mess, somewhere in the midst of that, Jesus gives us this ritual, a ritual of remembrance, which turns us around in its simplicity and its physicality, a ritual of bread and wine that gives us a moment to sit and eat at God's table in the new heaven and the new earth which God is realizing around us, the new and better heaven and earth which Jesus brought here, which is here with God and yet isn't completely here.

But in the moment where we receive bread and wine, in that tiny moment, we offer just a glimpse of heaven here and now. We can look beyond the human mess.

[5 : 58] We are in God's time, sat at the heavenly banquet, foretold by all of the Hebrew prophets, taking just enough of a taste of heaven to feed us for our long earthly journey ahead.

And Jesus asks to be remembered in two such humble things, really, bread and wine. When we're told that this is the context of the Passover feast, where God points towards freedom, you think that the lamb would be an obvious thing to be remembered in.

But perhaps we can speculate. There were many reasons why Jesus didn't pick the lamb. But perhaps he picked bread because even the poorest in the world mostly have access to bread or something like it.

And God is never sought to be only remembered by the rich and favored. He didn't ask to be remembered in any other of the excesses, but in bread, the most basic of all human foods, the stuff of life, which most would have access to.

Bread, the golden product of seeds sprinkled on the earth and harvest. Bread, like miraculous manna in the wilderness, which God rained down on God's children so they would be fed.

[7 : 07] Bread, like Jesus said, the stuff of life, the stuff of daily needs. And perhaps in all of this, when we see God in bread, God promises us that God is there not in the spectacular, but in the everyday realities that make up life, dull necessities that can grind us down.

But God is there feeding us in the ordinariness of it all, in the taste of warm bread and in the stale crusts left at the end of the week. There is the wonder of God in such a small thing if we can just stop and see it.

And perhaps, perhaps that is important because in our lives, it can be so easy to move from wonder to a sense of anxiety. It's very difficult to keep slowing down and seeing God in the ordinariness of stale bread.

God doesn't just ask to be remembered in the bread. God also promises us that the wine is a new covenant in God's blood. And that's quite significant because throughout the whole of the Old Testament, wine is associated with heaven.

Prophets actually foretold mountains dripping with wine, great banquets fueled with wine. And we see another tiny glimpse of that possible heaven in the first miracle of Jesus, turning water into wine.

[8 : 29] And I think when Jesus is saying, wine is the new covenant in my blood, a new promise for a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth made possible by Christ, with Christ, when Jesus talks about the wine being his blood, we're reminded that he described himself as a true vine, which Matt talked a lot more about in the Lent course, a vine which we are all invited to take part of, branches of the vine of Jesus' body.

And the vine is tended lovingly, carefully by God. And vines are not easy plants, as I learned from Linda Hood, who it turns out is a bit of a horticultural expert on the Lent course.

Vines need a lot of work, careful pruning, feeding, watering, trellising, supporting. Even if they're successful, they can become so heavy with their own weight that they end up in the ground, rotten. And the thing about vines is that they create an abundance that must be used up. Grapes which must be harvested or they will rot, bringing down the whole plant. They create a need to celebrate, to take the grapes and drink, to enjoy and use up the juice.

And I think in this wine, God is pointing us towards heaven, towards joy and abundance, even on this one of the darkest nights of God's life.

[9 : 51] To God, on the road, God is leading us, which will end, we are promised, in a world with no pain, no fear, no mourning or suffering, but the healing of the nations.

And perhaps, throughout all of this, Jesus is offering a way to remind us ourselves of the route to heaven. Less bread and wine, which in their essence, their physicality, help us for a moment to slow down and be in God's time.

To taste the bread, however stale it may be, the wine, however poor it may be, and to see a little bit of the wonder of God and the wonder of heaven. Now there's an artwork I was going to share with you, but then I thought you might not like it, but here I am and now I've decided to busk it.

But there is a former Catholic nun called Sister Caritas, and she's a kind of pop artist, but she kind of plays upon a range of the famous pop art ideas from a very Catholic perspective.

And one of the images that she has is a can of tomatoes, and she says on it, Mary is the juiciest tomato of all time, which is a kind of play on the Del Monte tomato advert. And she also did one on Wonder Bread.

[11:04] I wonder if any of you were old enough to remember Wonder Bread, that enriched ration that was supposed to keep everyone alive, and it's kind of bread with loads of vitamins in it, I understand, yeah. So probably, did it taste nice?

It was all right. All bread tastes nice. See, Ron is very holy. But it's a kind of, so it's a very enriched bread, like golden rice, really, these days.

And she said, God is like the Wonder Bread, the enrichment that is there in our reality, making it possible to find God, to find love in the ordinariness, because God has already packed it full of vitamins, like the Wonder Bread.

And I guess the other way that God is kind of pointing us towards it all is through communion, the very act of communion, the act of taking bread and drinking wine. And in that act, we're always reminded that the path to this abundance, to this heaven, goes through the brokenness and the altar of God's body, an altar made when God chose to come and live among us, living us, loving us to the very point of death.

And when I think a bit about how we find love through God's body, I'm reminded of a story from the boy in striped pyjamas, quite a tragic book, in which there are two little boys living next to each other in a Nazi encampment.

[12:28] One of them is Jewish on one side of the fence, the less good side of the fence, obviously in a concentration camp, and the other little boy is an ordinary little boy. And like all children, they see past all of the horror there and they become friends.

And they meet each other and play with each other. And I don't think their parents really understand the depth of their friendship, a bit like perhaps as humans we didn't understand the depth of God's love. But one day, when they come rounding up the children to take them away and they come for the little Jewish boy, the ordinary boy goes too, holding the hands of the Jewish boy because he loves him so much he wouldn't let him go to a scary place on his own.

And that is, I believe, what God is doing, walking us on the path to the altar of God's body, a path where we are befriended and loved and held by the hand.

However difficult it is. And this path is always broad. The altar, when you get there, when you stop there, you always meet people you think you shouldn't, like this very ordinary little boy.

People who we think shouldn't be there. But I think that tells us a lot about God's love. Look at this picture where you see the women speaking to Jesus, a characteristic of his ministry.

[13:45] And there were far more disreputable people at Jesus' side, at Jesus' table throughout his life. And sometimes you see people you think shouldn't be there because perhaps you think they're more sinful than you.

Though God always teaches us not to judge. As humans, we have always struggles with it. I know I do. But we also meet people who make us aware of our own privilege. Because when you stop to eat at the table in God's time, you don't know who will be next to you.

But the person next to you is always equal in the eyes of God. So when I'm eating at the table of God, it makes me aware of how important it is to share what I have with the other children of God. Especially with those that don't have enough to survive. Because all are welcome at God's table. Even those who we dismiss or don't see.

And when we take the bread, when we drink the wine, we meet God. God who is human and broken and also divine and more than we could imagine.

[14:48] God who is more loving, more forgiving, more gentle than you expect. Who, like in the song that Phil just sang, opens the floodgates of love to water our earth. And I always find that encounter surprising.

Even when I've encountered that same generous God thousands of times. And we can meet this God, this shepherd who offers us the way to heaven at all times in the act of remembrance.

But coming to the table of God, taking bread and wine is never a neutral act even for Judas.

Because the table of God is always a place where we are transformed.

A place where the fruit of the vine and the work of human hands come together. Key ingredients for the kingdom of God. It's a place where we can meet Christ and let him change us.

Point us towards heaven. Away from the things that we might be struggling with or keeping us down. Transforming us towards the people that God is leading us to be.

[15 : 53] This is a transformation we even see in the disciples on the night of the Last Supper.

After all, we're told at the end that they go out singing a hymn. which is not how that meal started at all.

It started with pain worrying that one of them was going to betray Jesus. And even in the darkest and most deadly of times, like them, we are sent out with a hymn of God's love on our lips.

An abundance which like the grapes on the vine must be abundantly shared with the world or else it will rot. So today, as we prepare to share this sacred mystery, this heavenly feast, together, let's take some time to reflect.

Loving God, we offer you the parts of our life where we do not see you alive in the basic ordinariness of everyday life.

We offer all the days when we feel the darkness encroaching upon us, when we are surrounded by fear and anxiety, when we choose not to see you, because we find it uncomfortable.

[17 : 06] We offer you all those times and we ask you to meet us in them, in that darkness, in that fear, in that anxiety, in that uncomforness, in that pride, and show us your face so that we can be transformed.

Amen. we also offer you the moments where you are pointing us towards heaven like you are in the wine, pointing us towards our part in making the new heaven and the new earth a reality, when you are encouraging us to prevent hell on earth as it is for so many people.

We offer you the children caught up in conflict, the people whose livelihoods are taken over by climate change, all those who do not know how they will eat or get by, people overcome by pain.

We offer you all those people and we ask you as you point us to heaven to find a way that we can help prevent hell on earth and instead build your new heaven and new earth with you as you are already doing.

Loving God, we offer you all our misconceptions about who you are. We offer you all the times when we overlook one of your beloved children. We get in the way when we judge.

[18 : 30] Loving God, we know that you have been human and broken and that you understand our sin and we ask you to heal it from us to make our hearts clean and overflowing with your love as you design them to be.

Amen. And today, perhaps we ask in this meal, God, transform us like the disciples into people with your song on our lips and abundance in our hearts and send us out to pour that love into your world.

Amen. Amen. Amen. God bluntly, Christians and Christians and Christians and Christians