

Maundy Thursday  
March 28, 2013  
The Rev. Robert H. Malm

## Truth Unseen

Tonight we celebrate two truths – the truth of worship and the truth of service; prayer and action; knowing Christ is with us and sharing Christ’s love in the world. *“This is my commandment (my mandate), love one another as I have loved you...”*

We have two options for the Gospel reading appointed for this liturgy: from St. Luke, the account of the Passover meal where Jesus institutes the sacrament of his body and blood, the Holy Eucharist; or from St. John, a different dinner where Jesus washes the disciples feet, knowing that *“his hour had come to depart from this world...”* Two narratives; the same night; the same Last Supper. Jesus is just hours away from his death. He shows his disciples how much he loves them, and asks them to share this love with all the world.

The truth of love remains unseen until we make it visible. The Church is called to be the Body of Christ. We witness to Christ in our prayer and action, in our sacraments and service. Some call this “knowing Christ and making Christ known” The two narratives for this night, for the Last Supper, become our “both / and” for discipleship. We understand it is never an “either / or” between prayer and action, sacraments and service – always a “both / and.”

In 1856 in Paris, a group of Roman Catholic priests and laity founded a society devoted exclusively to the Adoration of the Holy Eucharist. The Society of the Blessed Sacrament came to New York City in 1900 and now their world-wide membership totals more the 100,000 clergy and over ½ million laity. Their rule includes the following:

*“By the grace of God you have been called to a life in which everything is inspired by the sacrament of the Eucharist. You must grow in daily knowledge of this mystery, and in a greater love for the Lord who gives Himself in it... (at) the heart of it is the self giving of Jesus...Always and everywhere you are called to rise above oppositions and divisions... Always look for what unites and fight everything that estranges and separates people from each other...”*

Tonight we see the self-giving of Jesus in sacrament and in service, in prayer and in action. Tomorrow Jesus’ self-giving is completed on the cross. The disciples did not understand how Jesus’ death is united to the Last Supper until after Easter. For them, this was truth unseen.

Later we sing three hymns written by Thomas Aquinas, perhaps the priest and scholar most identified with Eucharistic theology, with the mystery, the truth unseen of this night. He is in one of our stained glass windows, so he’s with us all the time. Aquinas, writing in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, believed the mystery of faith led a Christian to know the “substances” of bread and wine could become Christ’s body and blood. The physical

reality did not change. What Aquinas called “the underlying reality” did change. So we sing,

*Word made flesh, the bread he taketh, by his word his Flesh to be;  
Wine his sacred Blood he maketh, though the senses fail to see;  
faith alone the true heart waketh to behold the mystery.*

(Hymnal, 329, v. 4)

The English reformers, 300 years after Aquinas, needing to break with the Roman Church’s scholastic definition of “transubstantiation” believed that the change of the “substances” of bread and wine could not rationally be explained. The change is a mystery, a truth unseen. No doubt Queen Elizabeth I influenced the Church of England with her simple poem:

*He was the Word that spake it,  
He took the bread and brake it;  
And what that Word did make it,  
I do believe and take it.”<sup>1</sup>*

“I do believe and take it.” Tonight and in the days following, we celebrate Christ’s incarnate body becoming Christ’s sacramental body and empowering us to be Christ’s mystical body, the Church. In sacrament and in service Christ dwells in us and we in him. This is the truth seen and unseen. The hours, the days, the years pass. Christ’s passion and Christ’s glory is yesterday, today and tomorrow. All time belongs to Christ, forever and ever.

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14  
1 Corinthians 11:23-26  
John 13:1-15

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Price and Louis Weil, *Liturgy for Living*, Harper, 1979, p. 219.