

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14
Psalm 78:14-20, 23-25
1 Cor. 11:23-26
John 13:1-17

“So mortals ate the bread of angels; He provided for them food enough.”

Maundy Thursday is a strange day, and a strange service. We don't know whether we should rejoice, or grieve on this day. We hear of Jesus' final meal with His disciples, before He goes to the Garden to pray, to be arrested, and to be abandoned by His followers.

And yet, before He departs, Jesus at that last, bittersweet meal, leaves such an incredible gift to the Twelve, and to all who come after them, including our own selves. He gives us the Sacrament of Holy Communion. He gives Himself to us as a sign of His sacrifice and as a constant source of His Presence through all the long years of the Church's life.

The final verse of the psalm that we read today is my favorite verse of all the hundreds of verses in the Psalter: “So mortals ate the bread of angels; He provided for them food enough.”

This verse speaks of the manna, the bread from heaven that came down for the children of Israel in the wilderness. But the verse makes my hair stand on end because *we* can say it, in truth, as well. Jesus, the living bread that came down from heaven, comes down to us each and every time we gather in His name and offer the Holy Eucharist.

This evening we will sing one of the great hymns of the faith, “Now my tongue the mystery telling”, and it includes a verse that speaks directly of the incredible mystery and wonder of the Eucharist that Jesus has given us, in these astonishing words describing the action of Jesus:

“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.”

As we kneel at the altar, our eyes do indeed fail to see anything beyond the bread and the wine, and yet God is there. The Word made Flesh is present among us, by the power of His own words spoken centuries ago. He is present with us just as He was present to His first disciples at the Last Supper. We will be gathered around His table there.

Though this very evening His disciples will all scatter and abandon Him, God will never abandon us. Not even at the Cross. Not even at the Ascension, when He returns, in His risen body, to heaven. He remains also on earth to strengthen and accompany His people, because He descends to be among us at every Eucharist.

And so perhaps as our eyes fail us, we can look with the sight of faith for the unspeakable glory and splendor of our God with us, who, at the last, we shall see with our own eyes. We can “behold the mystery” of God choosing to come among us in these forms of food.

Our God of glory and splendor is so mysterious to us because when He comes to us, He almost always comes veiled in great humility.

He comes at the Eucharist, unseen, and vulnerable in the form of bread and wine.

He comes at the Incarnation in an ordinary human body, so average-looking that many failed to recognize Him as God.

He comes kneeling before His own followers, doing the embarrassing and awkward task of washing their feet.

This last so embarrasses St. Peter that he refuses to let Jesus touch His feet, until Jesus insists that it is necessary if Peter is to have a share in His ministry and His Body.

Why is it necessary? Why does this foot-washing happen at this same meal where Jesus institutes the Holy Eucharist?

We seem to remember the latter action much more – celebrating the Eucharist every Sunday, and in this parish almost every day. But we don't wash feet very often, except on this day, at this service. Why did Jesus put these two together, and why don't we?

When we begin to take seriously the real presence of God in Holy Communion, the union of these two actions of Christ begins to make sense.

When each one of us goes to receive the Sacrament, to have God placed in our hands and to receive Him into ourselves, He unites with our bodies. Just as any food that we eat goes in and nourishes us and build us up. The components of the food are broken down and then built into the very cells of our bodies.

So, too, with Christ. If He is truly present in the Sacrament, He becomes a part of your own cells, your own body. And He becomes a part of the body of the person beside you as well.

When we worship Christ in the sacrament we must then worship and serve Christ present within each human being who has become part of His Body, and He of theirs.

This is why Jesus unites the Eucharist and the Foot-washing at the Last Supper – so that we should never forget this connection. We should never forget the Presence of Christ in our Christian brothers and sisters. And so, too, we should never forget Christ's presence in every one of our human brothers and sisters. Christ assures us He is present as well in every poor, sick, suffering, lost, or lonely person in this world.

Once we recognize, with the eyes of faith, the glory of our God among us in the Eucharist, we must go forth, in the Name of Christ, and let our eyes be dazzled by His presence in people everywhere.

Here we receive the food we need to strengthen us to serve. To strengthen us to see and love.

So let me end with the words of another Christian, who perhaps can say this more eloquently than I. Bishop Frank Weston was the missionary bishop of Zanzibar and the eastern coast of Tanzania at the beginning of the 20th century, and he spoke passionately about the union of Sacrament and service. At a convention in 1923 he called his fellow Christians, nourished and strengthened by Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar, to come out from the altar,

“And walk, with Christ mystically present in you, out into the streets of this country, and find the same Jesus in the people of your cities and your villages. You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the Tabernacle, if you do not pity Jesus in the slum. . .

“Go out and look for Jesus in the ragged, in the naked, in the oppressed and sweated, in those who have lost hope, in those who are struggling to make good. Look for Jesus. And when you see him, gird yourselves with his towel and try to wash their feet.”

Amen.