

MAUNDY THURSDAY BACKGROUND

On the same night in which He was betrayed, He took bread. And when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body, which is broken for you. This do in remembrance of me." In the same manner also He took the cup, when He had supped, saying, "This cup is the new testament in my blood; do this, as oft as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat of this bread, and drink of this cup, you do show the Lord's death 'til He comes. (I Corinthians 11:23-26)

This is the night we celebrate our Lord's Supper with His disciples. To do that, we need to have our minds free to be with Him, and not struggling with the details. So let me remind you of the setting.

THE TIMING is like this: The Jewish nation, to which Jesus belongs, is getting ready to celebrate Passover, their most important commemoration. It is the heart of their remembrance of how God had delivered them, under the leadership of Moses, from bondage in Egypt some thirteen to fifteen hundred years before Jesus was born. Jesus loved this festival at least as much as we love Christmas or Easter. The festival will go on for several days, but the high moment is the Seder Meal.

Maundy Thursday is loaded and laden with the immediacy of Jesus' approaching death, which the disciples cannot quite understand or face. I still identify with them. I both do and do not understand it. I have and have not faced it. I want to enjoy the meal, and nothing is more important than being with Him, but I cannot shake the foreboding and the realization that everything has gone wrong. Love and sorrow mix and mingle, and cloak this night with meanings and feelings beyond all utterance.

Maundy Thursday is the culmination of Jesus' ministry, and the most profound day of His life on earth. I missed it for years, partly because I had not put the story together, and partly because there is so much happening that it is confusing. You know what it's like just before you go on a long journey. Kind of the same thing, only carried to the tenth power. PALM SUNDAY is our day. MAUNDY

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THURSDAY is Jesus' day. GOOD FRIDAY is the day of the opposition – the day of His enemies and Satan laced together. EASTER is God's day. Anyway, on Maundy Thursday, it all depends upon Jesus.

Maundy Thursday occurs on three levels at the same time – the political level, the relational level, and the personal level: Jesus is in a political drama with the leaders of the Jewish State. Jesus is having a banquet with His closest and dearest friends. Jesus is experiencing the hardest and most crucial day of His life on the inner and personal level of His own faith – who He is, what His truth is, and what His life is for and about.

ON THE POLITICAL LEVEL, Jesus has taken Jerusalem by storm. Since Palm Sunday, He has been teaching in the temple all day, every day, with huge crowds in approving attendance. Because of the popular support, nobody dares oppose Him openly. It would cause a riot, Roman soldiers would step in, and there would be a bloodbath. By nightfall, Jesus disappears and only His closest friends know where to find Him. There are no streetlights, helicopters, or even flashlights.

The Jewish leaders must deal with the “Jesus situation” before Passover ends. He knows this better than they do. Jesus has been planning it for years. He knows His true identity – He knows He is Messiah, the rightful King. He wants the nation to accept Him for what He is, so He can lead them into a new and better WAY. As those in power begin to realize that He means it, and as they come awake to His purpose, they grow furious and determined to stop Him any way they can. Of course, they do not see Him as Messiah, only as an upstart troublemaker without authority or credentials. Who does He think He is, to be causing so much trouble?! They are furious and, from their perspective, with very good reason.

ON THE RELATIONAL LEVEL, Jesus is saying goodbye. He wants to find ways to help His disciples remember and understand. It will be up to them now to carry on what He has started. He wants them to love and support each other, or He knows they will have no chance. On top of that, He loves them. So He prepares for them this last meal and final instructions – mandates, from which comes our name for this day, Maundy Thursday: day of commands, and demands. And Jesus is getting some mandates Himself – from higher up.

THE THIRD LEVEL IS PERSONAL. Jesus is up against His own moment of truth. Is He really willing and able to go through with this? Does any of it really matter enough to make it worth the price? Will anybody actually remember or understand? The world is crass, people are self-centered, everybody eventually dies, lots of people get killed unjustly ... so what good will ever come of His throwing His life away at thirty-three?

The Last Supper is inseparable from the crucible of the Garden, and the Garden is inseparable from the agony of the Crucifixion. There is no place in or around Jerusalem where Jesus can make it through this night. But there is one place He *can* go: North! Home ... to Galilee.

The authorities would never bother Him again if He did that. The crowds would look for Him tomorrow and would not find Him, and they would be disappointed but they would forget. They do not understand yet anyway. They would also melt away when it came to a real power play. Liking Him and thinking His movement is appealing is one thing; facing Roman steel is another. Jesus knows all of this. All He has to do is start walking North – back to Galilee. He could teach, heal, be wise, and help people there for the rest of His life – marry, have children, live a wonderful life. But the decision is upon Him. It is now or never! The entire Message and history of Christendom hangs in the balance. And no other human on the face of the earth – before or since – would have chosen as Jesus chooses. Some, following Him, have come closer than the world can understand.

So this night, Jesus tries to pray. And a voice screams at Him: “This is stupid! This is useless! No good will ever come of this! Get out of here! Leave – NOW!” Jesus has wrestled with this voice before, many times, all through the years. Dear angel of logic and practical right – High Angel of Light: Lucifer. And what a hummer he is on this night. Satan had promised to return at a more opportune time; no time will ever be more opportune for him than this.

This is the night – the pivot point. It all hangs in the balance here. It will all stand or fall from here. And it *will* be decided here, on this night. From the moment of His arrest, Jesus’ work on earth is finished. Not His work as the Christ, of course, but as a human, there is nothing more He can do. It is out of His hands. The world

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will treat Him as it will, and He will simply let it – let it be clear; let reality be clearer than it has ever been before. The world does not love God – it does not want God fooling around in its affairs. The world will not listen, cooperate, or obey. So it happens on all three levels: the political, the relational, the personal. It all culminates here. Maundy Thursday ... the Day of Command. From God to Jesus ... from Jesus to His disciples ... and from there to here, and to us.

WHEN IT GETS REAL

In order to talk about when it gets real, we may need to start off with when it is not real. And what is “it”? “It” is forgiveness. Why is forgiveness so hard to receive – and before we receive it, so impossible to give? It seems a simple enough thing, when we are just talking about it. It is one of the most disarming subjects in all of theory, when it is only on the theory level. Sitting in a circle, talking about forgiveness, it all begins to feel so obvious and logical, so right and simple, that pretty soon everybody is feeling magnanimous and having a hard time understanding why anybody else would not be, and what a wonderful world it would be if everybody would give and receive forgiveness on a regular basis, as just part of the regular understanding of life and how life works.

Even at that very moment of discussion, there may be many people in the circle who have places of major judgment going on in some relationship in their lives, and others are living under a nearly crippling fear of not being forgiven in some area of their lives – but all of that is temporarily muted or tucked away in an out-of-the-way corner of the mind. Forgiveness can be a terribly elusive topic. I believe that is because forgiveness is so crucial – so important – that the mental protection mechanisms keep us from looking at the subject full-force and head-on, at least most of the time.

At this particular moment in time, for instance, there is not one single person in this room who has fully received the forgiveness of God Almighty, as offered in Jesus Christ. It necessarily follows that there is not one single person in this room who is able to forgive, or capable of fully forgiving, others as God in Christ has forgiven us. That means that every one of us is still partially crippled, spiritually speaking – unable, as yet, to fully accept our identity or full purpose in the partnership we have with Christ, and in the purpose we have under God.

On the other hand, most of us walked into this room tonight not fully aware of this crucial lack. To be sure, we have *some* life, and some grace, and some joy. And to that degree, we are partially awake and grateful to our God. To that degree, we can be

participants in the Kingdom of light that Christ is bringing to fruition among us. So we have received *some* forgiveness. We have good reason to rejoice, and surely we have reason to hope in the future that is coming. But why, after all these years, are we not more eager for further grace, further redemption, further forgiveness – that we might cooperate more in bringing the remaining parts of our lives into the light?

This night two things happen – happen in such a way that all Christians have it branded into their brain waves. Lots of intrigue around the edges and nearly endless sideshows of very considerable importance are going on. There are thirty pieces of silver tinkling, and a cock crowing, and disciples running away ... there are questions, and answers ... there are commands, and sayings – and one can ponder the import of it endlessly. But two things happen that dwarf everything else.

1.) Jesus inaugurates the table fellowship, the meal by which and in which we can be in fellowship together in His name, and be in His presence together – from that moment on until the end of the age. This meal is the mark of the church – and more than the mark, it is the reality that gives us the grace and courage to go on. In communion, the New Life gets real, and we share in His death and in His forgiveness – as a people called to do this together in His name, and to carry, wherever we go, the New Life He offers.

2.) Secondly, on this night Jesus makes the final decision to carry it all through to the end, to completion. He was leaning in that direction before. It keeps coming clear to Him that things are moving in this direction. No matter what He does, which way He turns, or how He presents the New Life – unless He backs off or takes a new direction entirely, life keeps pushing for Him to recant, to compromise, to soften things, to let the old life have a bigger piece of the pie.

This night the final testing comes, and the decision has to be made. “Why do I have to die for what I believe in? Why isn’t there some more reasonable way? Surely the teachings, the healings, the miracles, and all the love with which I have loved those who would follow and respond – surely this should be enough! *Please, FATHER, if it be possible – let this cup pass from me.* Do not make me drink this mission all the way unto death. What sense can this make?”

Crucifixion is tomorrow, but all the turmoil, temptation, testing, and decision is tonight. This night is when the world changes. This night is when the world runs into one Obedient Son who means it all the way. On Sunday, *millions* will celebrate the result, whether they have any clear notion of the import or not. But this night is the night it gets real. Does He mean it, or does He not mean it? Do we mean it, or do we not mean it – this thing about discipleship ... about loving Him and following Him ... about turning life over to Him that we may become who we truly are?

It is a funny thing (unless you believe in Satan) how after all this time it is still difficult, at first, to stay clear about the issues. Even as we state them clearly, they try to fuzz in our minds.

Human beings are lost in fear and doubt, in anxiety and alienation, in guilt and fear. “What fear and guilt? I’ve never done anything so very wrong.” You do not have to *do* wrong to *be* wrong. What about the attitude? What about the mind and heart?

At the heart of this alienation is a rift between us and God – a conviction that we can never be enough – and with it comes a fear that we can never really be accepted – acceptable to God. At the core, that is what causes us to mistrust and misuse and terrorize each other. “I don’t have any problem with God. Sometimes I’m not even sure I *believe* in God. And besides, whether I do or don’t, it has nothing to do with the way I live or the way I treat other people.” I have actually heard people voice such thoughts. Quite a few times, as a matter of fact.

Down through many generations, without destroying free will or making the world into a puppet show, God tried to reveal the WAY of Life that humans were designed for. God tried as clearly as possible to show how much love and forgiveness and grace were waiting for us – for all the children who would receive it. He sent prophets and priests and kings, and events and signs and wonders. Some people caught on, but only tentatively and partially. And often even when they realized that something dramatic had happened, they soon would “forget,” which means they talked themselves out of it. “It was probably just a coincidence. Who knows for sure? The records are too faulty.” So we always try to return to our fear and anxiety and alienation. It is so familiar – it is the way things are; anything else must be an aberration, a mirage.

But we and our kind are no more content with the negative than we are with the positive. On another level, we are always trying to comprehend. We build temples, and try to understand and share the sacred meals with God. We often dedicate ourselves to a higher life, and try to follow rules and precepts that we think will make us more pleasing to God. And though we are always aware of the shortfall, sometimes we truly repent, beg for forgiveness, try to get right again – or at least more right, or closer to right. So we make sacrifices and design elaborate rituals to express these themes of forgiveness, renewal, and dedication. Somehow humans have always known that they are designed for more than they can see or experience. The mark of the Creator is deeply embedded, and our hunger for God has haunted us through all generations. “Ah, just a bunch of superstition. People will make up anything to make themselves feel safer or more important. It’s all just imagination and wishful thinking.” And are aloneness, guilt, fear, and depression also imagination?

And so, in the fullness of time, God sent the Incarnate One. Not to change the truth, but to reveal it – to bring all the themes to apex, and to reveal them on a level that human individuals could comprehend, a level suitable for us as human individuals: Stop living for yourself. Come live for the Kingdom of God. This God loves and desires fellowship with all the children everywhere. There is harmony and peace to be found with God, no matter what is going on in the world around you. You can be witnesses and bearers of this New WAY of Life. But first you must turn life over to the One who speaks in the silence of your inward being. You must be willing to give up whatever stands between you and God. You must be daring enough to believe in this love that makes you vulnerable and valuable. You must be willing to believe and receive this forgiveness which frees and cleanses you, and gives you your own mission in and for the Kingdom.

To which we reply: “Very fine sentiments indeed. And I would love to believe in them. But I also live in the real world, where I would get cut to pieces if I lowered my defenses and started living in such a different WAY.” That is very possible, of course. It happened to our Leader; it could happen to us. Different WAYs always conflict in a broken world.

And so the One sent to us did run into all this defensiveness, cynicism, fear, disbelief, anger, resentment, and jealousy. We killed Him, of course. We humans – our kind – killed, rejected, ignored, turned away. But He was careful and brilliant. And so the story and its reasons could not be completely hushed up or buried – though many tried, and most still do. Yet in every generation there are those who keep the story alive – who learn it, and tell it; who carry it, and let it draw them into a New Way.

Never mind the end of the story yet: The Resurrection – the backing of God. The decision to stay faithful unto death, and the resulting reaction of the world – the Crucifixion. All of it put together made some things clearer to us than they had ever been made before, or since: the depth of our alienation and anger toward God; the magnitude of the fear and guilt that bind us; the reality of our Sin, and the reality of how deep and strong is our denial of this Sin. “Well, I don’t see what some ancient Jew has to do with us today. Or how his death could be relevant to me or my friends now. And I don’t see what I ever did to deserve the death they say he died for me!” It’s okay, friend. Go back to sleep. You don’t have to be troubled by any of this if you don’t want to be – at least not as long as you can keep your soul asleep.

So why this strange drama? Why didn’t Jesus go back to Galilee before they could arrest Him? Why didn’t Jesus just preach the message of forgiveness and let people take it or leave it alone?

The answer is simple: Because most people *would* just leave it alone. The issue is too big and too dark for us to face alone. This caring love and offer of forgiveness had to be backed by greater evidence, or none of us could take it seriously. We do not “speak” or “think” in the images of altar sacrifice anymore. But a thing said in the letter to the Hebrews still rings: “*Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*” Do not be too literal; it is often literally true, but do not let the symbol language throw you off the truth. “*Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*” We never *ever* forgive another without paying a price. We never receive forgiveness without someone else paying a price. This is not a parlor game. True forgiveness is when it gets real – coming or going.

We have all heard the words of forgiveness and the reassurances of love and caring a thousand times – when it only

meant convenience, or it sounded nice, or it was done in a socially acceptable context. Acting *nice* is one of the games all civilizations play on the surface. That does not mean we should trust it very far, or count on it very much, if any real issues come up. We are all used to promises and fair words that do not carry very much collateral. To be sure, it makes the world more pleasant than it would otherwise be – on the surface. Good manners are better than bad manners, even if they never add up to true community or genuine love. But deep inside, where it really counts, it is not nearly enough. In the end, try as we might, we cannot read the New Testament as a book about good manners.

Had our world and our kind not resented and hungered for Jesus' death with the great passion that finally killed Him, then His New WAY of Life would not have been the authentic dynamism which deserves either that hatred – or our love. Had His New WAY not been so different, we would not have needed His sacrifice to persuade us that He was ... how do we say it? In dead earnest.

In short, the forgiveness Jesus was talking about – the full forgiveness and acceptance of God – must be sealed in blood, or, try as we might, we would never be able to admit that our Sin – our alienation and animosity toward God – is serious enough to warrant all this concern and attention. The other side of that very same coin is just as transforming: The forgiveness Jesus was talking about – the full forgiveness and acceptance of God – must be sealed in blood, or we would stay deeply convinced that our own sins are too deep, too terrible, too secret, or too subtle to be included in the promises of God made known in Jesus Christ. Even still today, we half suspect that there must be exclusion clauses, and that if there are, surely we fit into one of those categories.

“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” That is, we would not believe it – we would not trust it. Not when it matters most. Not when it gets real.

Some will tell you that Jesus' blood was so precious that it paid the price for our sins and took our deserved death from us. I do not often use such language because none of us have altar sacrifice as our experience of how to be forgiven. Yet on another level, I believe this statement to be true. I certainly believe that Jesus' blood (Jesus' life force, as people of His time would have thought of it) is precious

enough to do that – and far more. It is, at least to me, inescapably true that Jesus waited for those temple police and went with them because He could not figure out any other way to get my attention – to get behind all my defenses – to get my soul to come awake and say, “You mean you aren’t kidding about forgiveness – this New Life – this LIFE with God that is unafraid of anything in this world?!”

“Please don’t do this,” I want to cry. “It’s not necessary! I will believe you. I will trust your love and accept your forgiveness. I promise!” And He just looks at me, in that way He has, and asks, “When?”

And then I know why He had to die for us.

COMMUNION

We each have our own ways of running away when the Lord truly needs us. We also talk when we should listen, then keep silent when it is time to bear witness. The cock still crows. The world still turns away ... and loses again its rightful King.

Whenever that happens, imposters step in. And whenever that happens, Satan remains to rule us – and we get only glimmers, hints, tiny bits and pieces of who we really are ... why we are really here ... what we could do and be with each other ... who our God is ... and how much we are loved.

So we each have business at this table: confessions to make; forgiveness to receive; commission to accept; limitations to shake off; our Savior to thank, and love, and follow. He did this night all alone once. Never again.