

### Invitation to the banquet

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on Maundy Thursday, April 2, 2015.

*I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night before he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 1 Corinthians 11:23-26*

We are gathered this evening to do precisely what Jesus asked us to do on the night before he died. He asked us to share the bread and wine to remember him. We have been faithful in keeping this great act of remembrance for over two thousand years. Whether we call it the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion, the Holy Eucharist or the Mass, this is the greatest act of devotion we can offer to God. These elements of bread and wine are signs of Christ's real presence among us. The celebration of the Eucharist is most sacred and it is not to be trivialized nor treated casually. It can be celebrated very simply or very elaborately, depending on the occasion and local tradition.

Mealtime is an intimate experience. If you are anything like I am you don't enjoy eating alone, especially in a restaurant. We prefer sharing a meal in the company of those who are compatible and we enjoy. If we are at a business or working lunch, it can be either a pleasure or a dutiful chore, depending on the company. We all know what it is like to be at dinner seated next to someone who has nothing to say or someone so self-absorbed that they keep the focus on themselves and never ask about you. We like to be with those who are engaging and stimulating and are good listeners as well as good conversationalists. At the Eucharist, we may find ourselves next to someone with whom we disagree and don't particularly like. It is before the altar we are reminded that we share this most intimate of sacred meals with all sorts and conditions of God's people and that the difficult people in our lives are as much loved by God as we are.

The name of this day, "Maundy Thursday," is taken from the Latin *mandatum novum*, referring to "the new commandment" that Jesus gave us to love one another as we are loved by God. This is not a suggestion. It is a commandment. Jesus commands three things: that we love each other, that we are baptized and that we share the bread and wine in remembrance of him. As we gather now in this very real and intimate way, we are brought close to Christ's presence among us in these elements of bread and wine. On the night before he died, he took the bread and wine and blessed it and shared it with his friends. When bread and wine are blessed, they are set apart and made holy for this sacred meal. It is no longer ordinary bread and wine; it represents Christ's whole person, his life, his teaching and his example of compassion and sacrificial love for us.

The two most important elements in this sacrament are thanksgiving and offering. We are offering our thanks to God for the example of Christ's sacrificial love for us and we are making an offering of our selves in return. When someone does something for us, we feel we want to return the favor. In the same way, in the Eucharist we have the opportunity to offer our selves, our souls and bodies in return for what we have received in Christ. Contained within the word Eucharist is the Greek word, *charis* that means grace, God's unmerited, undeserved, unconditional love for us. We cannot earn God's grace. It is given freely out of love for us. The spirit of the Eucharist is egalitarian as we present ourselves before the altar and share in this sacred meal. We bring before God our uncertainties and our brokenness to be renewed and strengthened to go forth and serve in his name.

Think about this as you come forward to the altar tonight. You are following in that long line of faithful people who have kept Christ's commandment to share in this sacred meal. We are joined with all the saints, living and dead, in this great act of thanksgiving. You and I are part of a long line of witnesses stretching back over two thousand years as we express our complete oneness in Christ.

This is what makes us part of that great cloud of witnesses known as the communion of saints.

Take this sacrament as signs of Christ's sacred presence among us. Let it renew your spirit and give you strength to meet the days ahead. Let these signs of bread and wine remind us that we meet Christ in all people, at all times, in all places and in all the events of our lives. He is with us every day in every way, but most importantly he is present with us this great sacrament of the Eucharist.

