

Maundy Thursday, 21 April 2011  
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR  
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Maundy Thursday is a wonderful day filled with beginnings and endings. That is probably why it has such a stunning array of traditions associated with it. A community which held all of the services traditional to this day would be busy from dawn well into the night.

It is a day of endings because this is the day that marks the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, the end of his time of teaching and preaching and healing, the end of his journeys with the disciples. The story is ending – and it ends with dinner and prayer.

One last time, Jesus gathers with his friends to share a common meal. But it is the last one and so it is different from any of the ones that went before. This time Jesus again talks with them about love, about the love that God has for them, the love that he has brought to them, the love that they are to have for one another.

The name of the day Maundy Thursday, from Thursday of the Mandatum, Thursday of the Commandment, comes from Jesus' command that we "love one another as he has loved us." And Jesus acts out that love in two ways at this last gathering.

First, he washes everyone's feet. This was an important act of hospitality in a time of sandals and dirt roads – but it was servant's work. The disciples were confused and uncomfortable, but Jesus insisted – and insisted that they remember this one last act of service to them, so that they would know they were called to be servants of one another, and of everyone else.

That is why foot-washing services have long been part of this day. The Pope washes feet today. The Archbishop of Canterbury washes feet today. The Queen of England distributes Maundy money to elderly men and women noted for their service to their communities on this day. Remember to be servants, and so show others the love that God has shown you.

The second way in which Jesus acted out God's command of love was in the meal itself. He shared bread and wine with them one last time, as he had done many times before. But this time he told them that the bread was his body given for them, about to be broken for them – and that they were to eat it. He told them that the wine was his blood about to be poured out in sacrifice for them. And they were to drink it. Their last meal together begins the Eucharist, gives us a meal in which to participate in God's love for us, and build a community of love with one another. A last and a first.

One way of thinking about the Bread and the Wine, the Body and the Blood, is to think about them as the two ends of Jesus' earthly life. The Bread, the Body, is his incarnation. This is the beginning, when God takes on human flesh and comes to live among us as one of us, sharing our life completely. The Wine, the Blood, is his death. This is the end, his willing sacrifice on our behalf, taking into himself all the violence and rejection that human society can offer, and swallowing it whole, washing away all its consequences with his own blood.

The beginning and the ending of Jesus' life are here in this meal, in this Eucharist.

And so we have services like this one in which we ring the bells one dramatic time at the Gloria, celebrating the gift of Christ's presence with us forever in the Eucharist, begun this night.

This last time of gathering in a fairly normal way sets the stage for the agony in the garden, the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion. This service begins the Sacred Triduum, the Sacred three days, during which Christ goes right through death into a whole new kind of life.

Once we have reached this ending, there is no turning back. Death is inevitable.

And so many other services and practices of preparation have been added to this day.

This is the traditional day for clergy to renew their vows, so that they will be ready for this grand celebration of the beginning of the Eucharist.

This is the traditional day for bishops to bless oils to be used in healing and baptism throughout the coming year – and especially in the great original baptismal celebration on Easter Day.

This is the day when individuals who have taken on particular penances during Lent, who have been cut off from God and God's community by their sinfulness have a special service of reconciliation. It marks the end of their penance so that they can join in the whole Triduum.

This is also the traditional day which ends the preparation of adults for baptism and confirmation – the end of their study, the beginning of their inclusion. So there may be a special service of blessing, before they go through the Triduum as participants for the first time.

Endings and beginnings.

All of these other services happen during the day leading up to this evening service. This celebration of the establishment of our Communion meal marks the last time it will be celebrated before it is all new again on Easter. And so the service ends with stripping the Altar and the whole area around it of any decoration, any candles or linens or hangings or bread or wine or oil or bells. All gone. The tabernacle, that little cupboard where Christ is always present in the Reserved Sacrament, is empty. The hanging lamp representing his presence is gone. An ending.

Then the altar is washed with clean water and herbs, washed in silence with reverence and awe. This is where Christ has come to us in the Eucharist. Now it is bare, representing for us his body broken for us and dead, being washed for burial.

But even as we have that acting out of ending, we have the tradition of the Garden Chapel and the Altar of Repose. Jesus went from the Last Supper to the Garden of Gethsemane one last time. It was a place where he was accustomed to go with his disciples, a place of rest and prayer. One last time.

And so we gather our plants to make him a garden and we place there Bread and Wine, Body and Blood, saved from this service so that we may have the sacrament tomorrow. The sacrament will be covered with a pall, the same one used to cover ashes at a funeral, acknowledging the death, the ending that is at the heart of all this. But the Tabernacle light follows. It is there showing the beginning that is in this ending. And there for an hour tonight, and an hour before each of the services tomorrow, we can come to meditate and pray, to spend our time in the garden with Christ.

Beginnings and endings, a kind of overlap. Tonight brings all of the stories to a close, but opens the way to a new story, a new journey, right through death to new life, right through human violence and rejection to the triumphant love of God.

“Most Merciful Lord, Your love compels us to come in. Our hands are unclean, our hearts are unprepared; we are not fit even to eat the crumbs from under your table. But you, Lord are the God of our salvation, and share your bread with sinners. So cleanse us and feed us with the precious Body and Blood of your Son, that he may live in us and we in him; and that we, with the whole company of Christ, may sit and eat in your kingdom. Amen.”