

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Mass of the Last Supper, Maundy Thursday

Thursday 6 April 2023

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Sermon by Fr Max Kramer

This day shall be a day of Remembrance for you.

+ I think how a priest sees the Eucharist, the ritual instituted on Maundy Thursday with the Last Supper, is forever shaped by the first time they celebrate the sacrament. Whether you like it or not, memories of that first experience of life at the other side of the altar, handling the bread and wine and saying the words of Jesus himself, flood back day by day, year by year as celebrating the Eucharist becomes part of your daily life.

For some, I suspect, those memories are a bit embarrassing or cringe-worthy – forgetting some words or a gesture, or that word you once stumbled over nervously – mistakes that come back to haunt you again and again every single time. For others it might be a spiritual memory, a particular moment of connection or significance never picked up before, but which reminds us of a fresh insight granted to us for the first time that day.

For me, however, it was tragedy that overshadowed my first Mass but which also deepened my own understanding of the Eucharist forever. Ordained on Saturday, I spent Sunday with friends celebrating for the first time, in eager preparation for my own Eucharist on Monday evening. Only to discover at a celebratory meal on Sunday night, that a friend, an assistant priest in my Church, and a key member of the Cambridge church world, called John Hughes, had died in a car crash. He was 35.

My own first mass the next day, as you can imagine, was filled not only with people who had come to support me, but also with huge numbers who had come to remember John, and just to be together in a place that had been so significant for him and for all of us.

And as I sat there, as celebrant for the first time, listening to the sermon of the priest, I thought to myself that nothing else in the whole world that we could have done – apart from celebrating the Eucharist – would have been able to contain such deep sorrow and such deep joy. For both of those overwhelming emotions seemed to be able to find a place in the sacrament of the altar. The Eucharist did not simply become some kind of requiem for John, but nor was the grief lost or denied amidst the celebrations of a new ministry, but sorrow and joy were somehow held together in a saving action that was larger than both and could hold them both together.

And this realisation, I believe, has enabled me to see this spaciousness of the Eucharist as central to its power. It's there in our readings today. The Passover sacrifice is a moment of hope and liberation, but equally a moment of anxiety and stress. We hear of the family feast and the great escape, but also of the eating in haste, and the dark passage of the angel of death.

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The words of Jesus themselves speak both of the death and suffering that is to come – the body given up, the blood shed – but also breathe life and purpose and community into the nascent Church which lives on beyond the Cross – *do this in remembrance of me*.

And perhaps this double aspect of the Eucharist is summed up in the symbols themselves. Bread and Wine. On the one side, this is the sustaining nourishment of life. As Psalm 104 puts it, *The Lord brings forth food from the earth and wine to gladden our hearts. Oil to give us a cheerful countenance, and bread to strengthen our hearts.*

The bread and the wine speak of the joyful gifts of God which give satisfaction, pleasure, and energy to get on with our daily lives.

Yet in the context of the Passover, the bread also represents what Deuteronomy 16 calls *the bread of affliction*, the bread which represents sorrow, which represents the memory of the oppressions of Egypt and the necessity of escape. And in the context of Jesus' own teaching, the Eucharistic cup is also the cup of suffering which first Jesus and then his disciples must drink – and of which we too are asked, "can you drink the cup that I drink"?

Joy and sorrow, hope and despair, life and death, things that we usually experience one by one in the ups and downs of human life, are, it seems, brought together in a unique way in the Eucharist, in which we share in both the death and the resurrection of Christ.

And this is important because the obvious connection between the Eucharist and food can make us think of the Eucharist as just a kind of spiritual refuelling. And perhaps that's something we are in danger of encouraging when we preach – rightly – about the importance of being a 7-day-a-week, rather than a 1-hour-a-week Christian. If the Eucharist is just there to provide a bit of inspiration and uplift and teaching to help you live a good life, a kind of weekly pit-stop if you like before getting on with the race – Then, unsurprisingly, when people realise they can actually be good people without this weekly check-up, they see no need to continue attending.

But, for me at least, the Eucharist is far more than this. Rather than just providing the raw material for the *real life* business of work and play, the Eucharist is in fact the culmination and the high point of our daily or weekly reality, as everything we are – our joys and our sadnesses, our successes and our failures, every passing experience of our journey through time, is held before God in an eternal moment and then offered back to us as redeemed.

For in the Eucharist we are not just onlookers but *participants* in the eternal offering of Christ to the Father. We are bound into him as he offers the joys and sorrows of his whole life up upon the Cross

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and receives that life back again in the resurrection. And in this sacrament our old life too, with its angers and jealousies, its failures and its disappointments, is offered up, and a new life of hope and care and love is received. A life which binds us not only back into God, but also back into one another.

And there's a sign of that, this once a year, at Maundy Thursday, in the washing of one another's feet. Not just a symbolic action, like a visual sermon, that represents how we have to be kind to people - important as that is. But a moment in which we experience the reality of our community in a particularly profound way. The reality of our community, empowered by Christ, in which we are unashamed *to care for* one another in the humblest and most intimate way, and in which we are unashamed *to be cared for* by one another in the humblest and most intimate way too.

In the bread and the wine, in the washing of the feet, we are invited to share in a moment which connects our changing lives and God's eternity, our today and his always, a moment which draws together the whole range and scattered experience of human life, individual and communal, and offers it to God, and receives it back, ransomed, healed, restored, and forgiven. It is the place in which everything God is is most real to us, and everything we are is most real to him, and to one another.

It is perhaps, why, instead of all the memorials he might have asked for – in words, or in a book, or in a physical monument, or in a political movement – Jesus prefers rather to say to us today, every week, every day: do *this* in remembrance of me.