

“TAKING OUR LIFE IN OUR HANDS”

1 Corinthians 11:23-32

Maundy Thursday, April 5, 2012

The Church of the Holy Spirit, Orleans, Massachusetts

The Rev. Adam S. Linton

O Cherished Night, two nights from the Dawn!

Dearest Lord Christ, if uncomprehending we must remain, grant to us, at least, an undistracted love and awe.

Tonight, we commemorate the Last Supper, which Jesus shares with his disciples before he goes forth to his death. We are celebrating the institution of the Eucharist; indispensably central to our life as Christ's People. It's dear, especially, to our hearts as Christians of the Episcopal tradition. Characteristically, we are perhaps better at intuiting the importance of this night than articulating it. That's not so bad: after all, it's really beyond all possible articulation. But we hear; ponder and receive.

“The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”

(1 Corinthians 11:23-25)

These words never grow old. I've been a priest for over thirty years. I've presided at Eucharist thousands of times. In all the years, through ups and downs, attention and distraction, the self-attesting power of these words has always been evident: A narrative central to our purpose and mission.

If we combine the record of Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians with the Gospel texts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke we have the full formula that we know.

“TAKE, EAT! DRINK FROM IT, ALL OF YOU!” (Matthew 26:26,27)

Those are commands—not suggestions. Not, “feel free to sample, if you take a notion.” Commands; expressed in their own way in John’s Gospel, too: “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” (John 6:53)

Renewed attention to these words has reawakened us to the Lordly Command—and our following call, as the Church, to share. “The Gifts of God for the People of God.” We have been reawakened to the awareness that the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is not a “top-off” to some humanly achieved “state of grace.” The Eucharist is food for the journey: divinely established means to the divinely appointed end.

The Divine Commands, “Take, eat! Drink from it, all of you,” are uttered to the unworthy, undeserving, and unprepared. God pays for what God orders. “The Gifts of God for the People of God.” But there’s a lot going on in these words, too, that we may likely pass by, all too quickly.

While we ought to be truly grateful for much needed reawakenings, I wonder, sometimes, if there might be another unhelpful spiritual reduction going on in our thinking these days. What I mean is this: the reduction of the Sacrament to a hospitality ritual—a corporately self-serving proclamation of how very nice *we* are. (Unlike, of course, those *others*.)

But the Sacrament won’t be so reduced. The Proclamation is not about us. The Eucharist is a *risky business*. After all, we’re taking our life in our hands.

Immediately following Paul’s setting forth of the Words of Institution Paul has a mindful challenge to offer. This follow-up unfortunately now often gets dropped from the Maundy Thursday Epistle lection. We’ve included it, even though it feels a bit disquieting.

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.” (1 Corinthians 11:27-29)

Well, that certainly puts us in a tough spot! Is this just a bit of alien piety beyond which we've thankfully moved? I think not. More ancient devotion thought a lot about it—and really did much more than just think. It prayed and worked with the challenge. And there's more in it for us today than we may be inclined to admit.

There's a section in our current Book of Common Prayer, something of an antique holdover from the old Books. For a number of reasons, it no longer has much of a workable place in most Episcopal worship services today. However, I'm convinced that it still is valuable, at least from time to time, in our own personal reflections. It's called "An Exhortation," and it's found on page three hundred sixteen. Don't worry, I won't be reading it all the way to the end. Not quite. I invite you to open up a Prayer Book now, and take a look. The red volume in the pew racks. Page three hundred sixteen.

Whether it feels congenial or not, I'd invite us to be present with it; pray with it—breathe with it, as I say, and see what it may have to say to us. It'll be OK. We can take the time. It's Holy Week, after all.

Beloved in the Lord: Our Savior Christ, on the night before he suffered, instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood as a sign and pledge of his love, for the continual remembrance of the sacrifice of his death, and for a spiritual sharing in his risen life. For in these holy Mysteries we are made one with Christ, and Christ with us; we are made one body in him, and members one of another.

Having in mind, therefore, his great love for us, and in obedience to his command, his Church renders to Almighty God our heavenly Father never-ending thanks for the creation of the world, for his continual providence over us, for his love for all mankind, and for the redemption of the world by our Savior Christ, who took upon himself our flesh, and humbled himself even to death on the cross, that he might make us the children of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, and exalt us to everlasting life.

But if we are to share rightly in the celebration of those holy Mysteries, and be nourished by that spiritual Food, we must remember the dignity of that holy Sacrament. I therefore call upon you to consider how Saint Paul exhorts all persons to prepare themselves carefully before eating of that Bread and drinking of that Cup.

For, as the benefit is great, if with penitent hearts and living faith we receive the holy Sacrament, so is the danger great, if we receive it improperly, not recognizing the Lord's Body. Judge yourselves, therefore, lest you be judged by the Lord.

Examine your lives and conduct by the rule of God's commandments, that you may perceive wherein you have offended in what you have done or left undone, whether in thought, word, or deed. And acknowledge your sins before Almighty God, with full purpose of amendment of life, being ready to make restitution for all injuries and wrongs done by you to others; and also being ready to forgive those who have offended you, in order that you yourselves may be forgiven. And then, being reconciled with one another, come to the banquet of that most heavenly Food.

We may well wonder: Where's the Good News in *this*? Are we caught between a rock and a hard place? It sounds so "judgmental."

It is!

However, the words of First Corinthians—and their pastoral expansion in the Exhortation—are not meant to be a barrier to participation, but an invitation to faithful mindfulness.

In spite of all our best and necessary efforts, when we draw near to this Table we *are* coming to judgment. But if we come in faith, we do so eagerly. Because we are speaking of the **Saving Judgment** which God in Christ has undertaken on our behalf!

As we heard,

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Corinthians 11:26)

That's where this cherished night leads—and *must* lead. There's no fast-forwarding, no skipping over the tracks to the short-circuited "happy ending." If we try to do so, we miss the point. It would be like cutting, over and over again, to the last five minutes of the grand symphony—its glorious culmination that can only be understood in the context of all the music that went before.

It won't do to evade the empty, difficult starkness that will soon be upon us. Soon, yet very soon.

If we want to get to the "there" that we love, we have to go the way that Jesus goes. And because of where Jesus is going—where Jesus went—we can now live in the "impossible place," and there find a renewal we could never have before imagined.

"The light is with you for a little longer." (John 12:35) It will be dark soon. That's where the Light is going. Shortly after the episode in this evening's Gospel passage, which powerfully sets forth Christ's loving Servanthood, in fact almost immediately after, we hear perhaps the most poignant words in all the Gospels. "And it was night." (John 13:30) That's where Light will now take its place: **our** place, in the night.

So, Jesus is about to go forth to what the shared Bread and Cup mean—what they contain; what they *communicate*.

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

And *that* is the Good News! No merely human hospitality ritual; no mere expression of genial cheer.

The Eucharist *is* a hospitality ritual, of course—not ours, but the costly hospitality of God Incarnate, who will die in our place, that He might give us His life. Costly love: Christ's Life *for* ours; Christ's Life *in* ours. There's no other way to get there.

We can trust this Lord; Jesus knows what he's doing. So, here's the Word to all of us; to you, to me, to all who belong to Christ. This is the word from the Table of the Lord: Draw near in repentance and faith! Come forward to your Saving Judgment and new birth! Put down the old, tired self-protective scripts. (No one believes them anymore, not even you!)

TAKE, EAT! DRINK FROM IT, ALL OF YOU!

TAKE HOLD, AND LIVE!

TAKE YOUR LIFE IN YOUR HANDS!

There's a story about Dwight L. Moody, the noted—in fact, notably extravagant—nineteenth century American evangelist. I don't know if it's fully factual, or not. Perhaps it is an apocryphal story, after all. I like it nonetheless.

Moody is credited with the establishment of the “Altar Call,” a characteristic feature of modern revivalism. We may have seen an Altar Call, at least in broadcast form, from one of the old Billy Graham Crusades. The sermon would end with an appeal to turn to Christ. And the people in the stadium would then be invited to get up from their seats, come down, and gather before the pulpit in prayer; all this as an expression of their new (or renewed) commitment in faith as Christians. Well, Dwight Moody is said to have been inspired for the idea, in the first place, by seeing people go forward to receive the Eucharist at a service of Holy Communion at Saint James *Episcopal* Church, Chicago!

There's something to that.

All who will draw near to this Table; those who have been coming here for decades, and those for whom—perhaps—this night is a first visit, are being summoned to the grace and wonder of ongoing conversion.

In this life, when we come to the Altar, we will always be “sinners coming home.”

Sharing in the Eucharist of Christ is, indeed, an assurance, comfort, consolation, delight, and joy—a blessing beyond and beneath all our possible expression. But, once again, there are unhelpful reductions good to avoid. Like all the greatest gifts, the gift of Holy Communion is sometimes hard to receive. Rightly so. We can't reduce it to some feel-good tonic. (How could *that* be?) Nor can we turn it into a merely individual project. (It's *Communion*, after all.)

More risky business. Jesus will be doing things that we can't fully anticipate. (Maybe it's better for us that way.) There are parts of all of us that would much rather remain contentedly unaware. Waking up has its burdens! One thing that we can be sure that Jesus *will* do is to lead us out of our habitual insistence on seeing the problems of our life, over and over again, simply as the product of the bad “other people.” We do this globally, in society, and—most certainly—we do it at the personal level. Jesus is going to lead us to confront our *own* stuff. But never again will we have to try to do so *on* our own. By Grace, we will know peace. Also by Grace, we will undertake the

challenging interior journey. The renewal of the world starts in the depths of human hearts. Once again, no shortcuts!

In Eucharist, Jesus gives us His very life. The blessings and burdens of receiving are so closely bound together that it's sometimes hard to tell which is which. I'm reminded of words from the concluding chapter of C. S. Lewis' well-known classic, *The Screwtape Letters*, speaking of the redeemed souls who come to the heart of Heaven: "Pains [they] may have to encounter, but they *embrace* those pains. They would not barter them for any earthly pleasure."

So, what about suffering—our own and that of others? No easy answers. But in Eucharistic Life we are given to know that even our terrible nights and all our cups of dismay are held in the Night and the Cup of the Lord Jesus.

Because of Christ's sweaty Agony in the garden—and all that will follow—never again will we have to be owned by our fear, come what may. We may not understand what's going on, but now we may learn to let go of the old gripping panic.

Nothing that has happened to us, nothing that *can* happen to us, will be beneath the reach of our Lord's saving intention—or outside the realm of his saving competence. Nothing. We don't have to have it all figured out. Take hold, and live. Before the gracious Death of Christ, which this Sacrament proclaims: "Behold what you are; become what you receive."

In our personal lives and in the history of the Church, we are blessed with many wonderful examples of what this looks like when it is lived out. "So great a cloud of witnesses," (Hebrews 12:1) united at this Table.

In recent days I've found myself thinking, once again, of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In the midst of the nightmare of the Nazi regime, this young German theologian offered a costly witness to Christ. He had many opportunities to play it safe. He didn't. In the Spring of 1943 he was arrested. Early in 1945, he was taken from Buchenwald concentration camp to Schoenberg Prison. On Sunday, April 8, 1945, just as he concluded a service in a school building, two men came in with the chilling summons, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us." He said to another prisoner, "This is the end; for me, the beginning of life." He was hanged the next day, April 9, at Flossenbug Prison.

In the closing days of 1944, in the midst of his exterior imprisonment, he wrote a prayer to Christ. Like much of what he wrote during that time, it has a radiance and peace that can only come from above. Bonhoeffer was very much a realist. He surely knew where things would likely go. Nevertheless, his prayer seems a fitting conclusion to all that we are now considering. I'd like to share it with you now.

By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered,
And confidently waiting come what may,
We know that God is with us night and morning,
And never fails to greet us each new day.

Yet is this heart by its old foe tormented,
Still evil days bring burdens hard to bear;
Oh, give our frightened souls the sure salvation
For which, O Lord, You taught us to prepare.

And when this cup You give is filled to brimming
With bitter suffering, hard to understand,
We take it thankfully and without trembling,
Out of so good and so beloved a hand.

Yet when again in this same world You give us
The joy we had, the brightness of Your Sun,
We shall remember all the days we lived through,
And our whole life shall then be Yours alone.

Amen—and amen.