

TITLE: “Holy Table, Holy Love”

For Christian families, since time immemorial, the most important object in the house has been the dining table. As one Anglican priest (Capon) says, “As long as the household lasts, [the dinner table] remains the one thing that everybody uses most – the one and often the only place where the family meets in fact” ... “[The table] is the guarantee that the household is a real society and not a legal fiction; all true societies are defined geographically” ... “The Board...stands as the published map of the family. The bed was our place of being for only minutes...but the table is our [shared] territory literally for years.”

The family table is the holiest place in the house, in a certain sense. It's where the family bond is renewed, where a society begins, one set apart from all other families. The table is where you first learn your manners, how to share, and talk kindly to your brother, to set a good example for your siblings. There are more rules at the table than at any other place in the house, because the table represents a holy unity. The table is where a child begins to learn what the Psalm says, “How blessed it is when brothers dwell in unity” and “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.” The dinner table is not just a convenient place to satisfy your belly or to do paperwork, but a well-used table has the power to make peace and love, which are the fuel of human society.

If this is true of our family dinner table, if there's a powerful unity in that piece of furniture, then how much more power does the Table of God have, the holy altar, to draw the wayward souls of Adam's sons into a strong and eternal bond of friendship with God and with one another?

In our epistle lesson, St. Paul teaches us that "as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come." Maundy Thursday is the night in which this holy meal was established to be the fulfillment of the Passover meal. The Lord's death by which death is destroyed, is proclaimed in our lesson from the passion narrative of St. Luke's Gospel. Another passage, often remembered on Maundy Thursday is John 13, where St. John records the final teachings of Christ to His disciples. On the same night that Christ instituted the Eucharist, He took a towel and began to wash His disciples' feet. Then He taught them saying, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Then he said "12 This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you."

The new commandment in Latin is “Mandatum novum” from which the name Maundy in “Maundy Thursday” derives. The new commandment of loving one another is not new, but what is new is Christ’s revelation that we are to love one another “just as [Christ] has loved [us].” The Son of God washes the feet of sinners, and makes them kings and priests of the Almighty God. God’s own Son, who is truly and equally God, did not come into the world to be served but to serve sinners. This is something new. That we might be friends with God? This is something new and wonderful. Not only does he proclaim that He, the Son of God, will be the friend of sinners, but He says that He loves us, and that He loves us so much that He will personally stoop down and wipe away our filthy feet, that he will cleanse us from all stain with His own blood, so that whatever sins we regret, whatever we’ve done amiss, whatever we’ve left undone, the Son of God has come into the world to spread his life over us as a covering, that nothing might prohibit us from becoming the friends of God.

This is the Friendship that makes all other friendships possible. The friendships of this world will pass away, but to be Friends with God, that is a friendship that will never pass away. If you don’t see what a Wonder of wonders this is, consider who His friends were that Passover night at the holy table, and consider what those friends were about to do. They were about to prove to Him what kind of friends they were. They were about to show their desperate need for God to remake

friendship, to re-establish the possibility of all friendly relations, because in our sin we had become enemies of God, no longer capable of loving so deeply, so eternally, so selflessly, that our love might atone for our sins and the sins of others and re-establish the broken bond between heaven and earth.

Judas who would betray Him with a kiss, dipped the holy bread in the wine at the Last Supper, knowing that he had already agreed to betray Christ. And when Jesus said, "One of you will betray me," Judas looked Him in the eye and said, "Is it me, Lord?" What a shockingly two-faced and twisted liar! "Of course it is you, Judas. Why would you lie to me? If I tell you the truth, why do you not believe me?" But this was to fulfill the prophesy of Psalm 41, which says, "Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me." There's an old ceremony still performed today at Durham Cathedral in England, in which the Dean of the Cathedral addresses the monks in the person of Jesus, saying to each of them, "One of you will betray me," and again, "one of you will betray me" to which each monk replies, "Is it I?" Then each of them drinks the consecrated wine from a special cup, at the bottom of which is an image of the traitor Judas, so that when the monks looked into the cup, they would see their own reflection in the face of the great betrayer of our Lord. Apart from Christ's complete renewal of friendship, we would all be enemies to God.

What about the rest of his so-called friends? The Scriptures say, they all abandoned Him, except for St. John, and only because Jesus poured love upon John so that he would carry for His blessed mother Mary. Peter denied ever knowing Him, and even the women who knew Him stood afar off as He was crucified. The Blessed Virgin Mary and St. John were the only two that could be called His friends, and yet they were powerless to save Him. Only Jesus can make true and everlasting friendships possible, because only the perfect Friend, the one who needed nothing from us because He is God, only He could give Himself completely, expecting nothing for Himself but the loving approval of God the Father.

Shortly after His resurrection, Christ reminded the disciples of His commandment that they meet together frequently, around a holy table, to celebrate the Holy Communion. When He met the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they did not know who He was, until He sat down and broke bread with them, and then their eyes were opened and they knew that He was their Lord. His new commandment that we love one another in the way He loved, perfectly, seeking nothing for ourselves but the goodness of God, that love begins at the holy table. As the Anglican bishop, Thomas Wilson says, “[Christ] appointed this holy sacrament to be observed by all that hope for salvation through His merits. He laid down His life, to convince all mankind that their souls were in danger, without His grace & help. He appointed [the holy Eucharist] that they might not forget their danger; and

that they might have a cure for their diseases, and their fears.” Bishop Wilson continues, “If [Christ] had not appointed these means of grace [Holy Baptism and Holy Communion], by which we can plead before God, that His own Son has redeemed us from the power of the devil...not one of us would be saved.” And why? He says, “For my own part, I am not ashamed to confess, that were it not for the blood of Christ, offered us in this holy ordinance [of Holy Communion]; were it not through faith in His blood; I should never dare to apply to the great God for the pardon of my sins, for the assistance of His grace to keep me from ruining myself for ever. My own reason, my own power, would no more help me, nor keep me from ruining myself, than they would keep a new-born...from perishing, if it were left to itself.”

As sinners, we must confess that we require salvation from God on a daily basis. We need heavenly manna, our daily bread, the bread of angels, at every hour of our lives. Though Christ is present with us at all times, in all places by faith, at the altar is the only place where gives us bread and says “take, eat this is my body”. The altar is the only place where He gives us wine and says “take, drink, for this is my blood of the new covenant ... shed for the remission of your sins.” If we take Jesus at His word, then we must believe that this bread unites us to the true body of Jesus and this wine washes away all of our sins. This holy table is where the Church is made one body. Feeding on his body, together, as if we were all one person, that

is what makes us one body with Him and with one another, that is what opens our eyes, so that our hearts burn with a heavenly love, the love of Jesus. Apart from this meal, there would be no true, no united people of God, no Church, because the love displayed here binds all hearts in one, so that there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, and indeed, here it is no longer I who live, but Christ, so that all are made one in the body of Christ. This table is God's table, and it has the power to transform enemies into friends, to make a Saul into Paul, and a fearful Peter into the Rock on which the Church will be established.

Of course this means our altar is the table of the Lord too. By the power invested in the bishop who first consecrated this building, this little wooden table was set apart from all other tables, and God Himself put His blessing upon it. It represents the holiest of holies, God's footstool, and the place where Christ and all his angels descend to carry our prayers up to heaven. This table is the place where the Lamb of God descends in a holy mystery, where he shows forth his death in this time before His second coming. It's not we who make a representation of Christ's death on this table. Christ does it. We have no power to present Christ. That's what Bishop Wilson meant when he said, without Holy Communion none of us would be saved. Because we are terminally ill. Our sins have taken such hold on us that we cannot look up. God desires no sacrifice from us, or we would give it to him. Christ is our Passover lamb. He shows forth His death on this holy table. By His word and

promise, He blesses this bread and wine, and He pleads here with God for our salvation. If Christ were not in this meal, in this bread and wine, then we would have no pledge of our salvation given to us by God. We have received that pledge in Baptism, but then soon after, we all like sheep went astray. We broke our baptismal vows. What sign then is left to us, given to us by God Himself, that He considers us, not ourselves, but as His own Son, that He unites us in a mystical marriage supper of the Lamb, so that He now dwells in us and we in Him. Where else do we have such a divinely ordained pledge of our continual heavenly nourishment and salvation but here at God's table?

Now we see why Christ put so much emphasis on this meal on this table. Because this table has a power greater than Moses' rod that parted the Red Sea, a healing strength greater than the bronze serpent that cured diseases in the wilderness, a divine blessing more than that of the ark of the covenant that struck dead the man Uzzah who touched it. This table has more divine authority than Elijah's mantle that parted the Jordan River, more even than the fringe of Christ's garment that healed the woman who touched it from an issue of blood, and St. Peter's shadow that healed many from their diseases, and the handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched the skin of St. Paul and brought healing to whoever touched them. As the Anglican bishop Lancelot Andrewes reminds us, in the early church, the priest would take the holy bread and speak the words from Isaiah to each communicant and say, "Behold

this hath touched your lips, your iniquity shall be taken away, and your sin purged.”

Therefore, beloved, let us come to God’s holy table, with faith, with hope, and with a full intent to live a new life, and to follow Christ’s new commandment, that we love one another, not in the way that makes us feel good or holy or righteous, but in a way that dies to self and to all things, so that we might live the life of God in Jesus Christ. That is the only requirement. “Holy things for the holy” as the Scriptures say. Come to this table if you long to receive a love that is wholly unlike any other, that you might be able to love in a new way and truly live as Christ has taught us to live.

This is the night on which Christ our Lord was betrayed to be handed over and killed, so that we might have life everlasting. His last commandment to us before His death was to celebrate this holy meal. Come then, and let us feast, not on our own thoughts and imaginations, but on his body and blood. For as He said: “54 Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. 55 For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. 56 He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. 57 As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.” In the name of the Father...

