

Notes on the Readings for Maundy Thursday

Old Testament: Exodus 12: 1-4; (5-10); 11-14

This is the account of the institution of the Passover meal which Jesus transformed into the Eucharist for the sustaining and building up of the Church. The Passover was full of symbolism. It was to be taken standing up, the people being ready to flee Egypt; the lamb was to be roasted rather than boiled to save water and eaten with unleavened bread, as there was no time to use yeast; there were bitter herbs to remind them of their days in slavery; and there was the blood of the lamb to be spread on the door posts, to save them from the terrible judgement of the Lord and also to serve as reminder of the cost of their freedom.

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26

This is Paul's detailed account of the institution of the Lord's Supper, which he had from Jesus himself. St Paul had been dealing with the disunity of the Church in Corinth, and here he is stressing the unity which is to be found through sharing in the Lord's Supper. (It is deeply distressing that the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, is a matter of division in the Church of God today.). The central act of the Lord's Supper, the blessing and breaking and sharing of bread, and the sharing of the cup of wine would have been deeply shocking to the Jew. That Jesus should identify his body with the bread would have given them a jolt; but not half so shocking as the words over the cup. Blood was the very symbol of life and to consume it was unheard of. Yet for Jesus, he was making a new covenant with his people, just as the blood of the lamb did so for the Jews, confirmed later at Sinai. As the lamb's blood saved the Jews from death, so Jesus' blood won for us salvation.

Gospel: John 13: 1-17; 31b-35

St John's gospel doesn't give an account of the institution of the Last Supper, but an account of the washing of the disciples' feet at the Last Supper and Jesus' careful explanation of its significance for what is about to happen to him. It also indicates the way in which they are to comport themselves as ministers of the gospel. The washing of feet was a slave's job, and the feet of the disciples would have been dirty, gnarled and unpleasant to handle. Yet Jesus kneels down and washes their feet. He then explains what he had done and why. Jesus knows about Judas and the likely outcome of the coming days. He also underlines the significance of the Passion as showing the glory of God and of Jesus, bound together by love. And this is the final word that Jesus has for his friends, to love one another in the way he has illustrated through the feet washing. It is Peter who objects to having his feet washed, either because it offended him as a Jew, or out of unworthiness. Jesus says he will have no part of him if he continues. Can one read here that Jesus' sacrifice is for the whole human race and not for a special few?