

JOINING THE DOTS

Exodus 12. 1-14
1 Corinthians 11. 23-26
John 13. 1-17, 31b-35

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today is the day when we celebrate the institution of the Eucharist; and so it seems rather strange that we should read from the one gospel (that of St John) that has no account of that moment! Clearly, then, what is required today of all days is an exercise in ‘joining the dots’. To put it another way, tonight we are to ask ourselves, ‘What is the theological link between the Body of Christ given to us under the forms of *bread and wine*, but also *feet* (since our Lord washed the feet of his disciples)?

The beginning of the answer is clear enough: the word ‘body’ has been used elsewhere by Jesus himself to describe the Eucharist: ‘While they were eating, (he) took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said, “Take eat; this is my body”’.¹ At that Last Supper, Christ was not speaking English, nor Latin (and probably not Greek either); but Aramaic, in which there is no word that precisely corresponds to the Greek word ‘soma’, which is more or less the equivalent of our English word ‘body’ or the Latin word ‘corpus’.

It was very possibly St Paul who first had to decide what Greek word to use to translate our Lord’s words into Greek; and it is significant that he chose the word ‘soma’ (meaning ‘body’) rather than the word ‘sarx’, (meaning ‘flesh’, the word that St John uses when he tells us of Jesus’s teaching on the Eucharist in chapter six of his gospel).²

¹ Cf. Mt 26. 26.

² Cf. Jn 6. 35-59.

So why did Paul use the word meaning 'body'? Most likely because when he discusses the Eucharist in his first letter to the Corinthians, it is in the context of a broader discussion about two related things: the relationship between the Christian and the Church, and the relationship between the Christian and Christ. The Church, Paul says, is like a body, made up of many parts that all have a crucial but distinct role to play; but it is no ordinary body: it is the Body of Christ, the holy presence of our risen Lord in this world.

We Christians, as members of that unique Body, are members of Jesus and members of one another. These are not separate things, either. Our unity with one another is a bond of love; and not just any love, but divine love: charity, which is the very life of God. We can say that the Spirit of Christ is, as it were, the soul of the Church, making it a living and a life-giving Body. For the Church to reject love, then, would be to reject the very thing that makes her what she is; and for the Christian to turn away from love of neighbour is to turn away from our Lord, to cut ourselves off from the Body of which we are members and make ourselves dead limbs. In the same way, to cut ourselves off from the Church is to cut ourselves off from the lifeblood of the Divine Love.

There is, then, an intimate connection between love and the Eucharist. This is what Paul means when he says that until Jesus comes, when we celebrate the Eucharist, when we eat the Body and drink the Blood of Christ, we are proclaiming his *death*.³ Christ's *death* is the perfect, ultimate act of divine love, the love that never gives up, holds nothing back, demands nothing in return. If we want to know what our new life in our Lord looks like, we must look at the Cross.

How can we possibly respond to that extraordinary love? There are three answers, and they bring us back to feet (at last!). Firstly, in responding, we allow Jesus to love

³ Cf. 1 Cor 11.. 26.

us without demur and without false modesty. If Christ asks to wash your feet, let him. Of course you're not worthy. Neither was Peter; neither is anyone.

Secondly, as our Lord tells us, 'I have set you an example':⁴ let us wash the feet of others. Do I mean this literally? Yes; and at least literally. If there is anyone whose feet we would flinch from washing, can we really claim that we love them? Can we claim that the love of God is our real life, and that (as Paul says) 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me'?⁵ Tomorrow, we (if we could be in St Stephen's Church on Good Friday morning) would kiss an image of the feet of our Lord as he dies for our sins. Those feet were calloused, bloody, broken and pierced. They were physically repulsive. Today, tomorrow, and for the rest of our lives, whose repulsiveness will we wash and kiss and embrace?

Finally, 'how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger... who brings good news!'⁶ Today, Jesus offers to give us lovely feet. The Eucharist is our food for the journey, and our journey is a missionary one, because we are the Body of Christ. If we allow ourselves to be loved by our Lord, and if we allow that love to transform us until we long to embrace those who are repulsive and serve those whom we are given to serve, then we will all be preachers of the Good News.

Tonight, in a few moments, Jesus invites us to watch with him one hour. Let us do so; and then let us keep watch, for the whole of our lives, for opportunities to preach and to love even as Christ loved us and gave his life for us.

Amen.

⁴ Cf. Jn 13. 15.

⁵ Cf. Gal 2. 20.

⁶ Cf. Is 52. 7.