

Wednesday in Holy Week

St. Peter's, Petersfield

Wednesday 12th April 2017

Compline

Reading: John 13: 21-33; 36-38

And so to Peter. And Judas is still around. The other disciples are there too at this meal, which in John's Gospel is the day before Passover, for John has Jesus die on the cross just as the Passover lambs are being slaughtered in the Temple ready for the Passover meal on Friday evening. It is Thursday evening. We are at the Last Supper. There is an awkward atmosphere and a sense of foreboding. Betrayal is mentioned. Who is the betrayer? *"Surely it can't be me, Lord?"* That grammatical turn of phrase that expects the answer no, said out of an overhasty desire to disavow their own doubts and guilt, for underneath it all perhaps they know that they are all capable of betrayal.

Jesus had just washed their feet. Peter, like the others, has seen Mary of Bethany's extraordinary act of extravagance a few days earlier. Perhaps he had some sympathy with Judas' point of view about the waste of money and giving to the poor. He must have been somewhat alarmed now to see Jesus seemingly adopt Mary's idea and start to wash the disciples' feet. His is a typically male, culturally conditioned reaction. It's all right for women to do this, that's what you might expect them to do for their guests, even if Mary had gone overboard in her devotion. Well, we all know that Mary has a bit of a thing about Jesus anyway, but surely Jesus cannot be serious? He cannot expect us to react favourably and positively to such a menial and humbling task. How embarrassing! So Peter tries to make a joke of it: *"If you really must wash my feet, then go the whole hog and wash the rest of me too!"*

Judas has left the room to make his assignation with the Temple authorities and Jesus now talks about going somewhere where they cannot follow. Peter, eager as ever to vaunt his loyalty, expostulates *"Why can't I follow you now?"* He wants to be a faithful disciple. *"I will lay down my life for you..."* He echoes Jesus' own words as the Good Shepherd. Peter cannot follow yet and do as Jesus is about to do, but all in good time, Peter, all in good time. As it will be when the risen Jesus meets Peter again at the end of John's gospel. But now in his own strength and in his own time he cannot do what he now impetuously promises. Jesus prepares the Way, as he goes on to reassure the disciples. They will follow him one day but be assured, a room is prepared for them in his Father's house.

Peter, still tries to follow Christ in a literal sense, but at a distance into the courtyard of the high priest's house, yet he can't live up to his boast. His accent gives him away as a north countryman, a Galilean, and it's a woman who finds him out! Courage fails. Denial takes hold. *"No, I'm not one of his followers..."* If we can all be like Judas, as I suggested last night, then we can also be like Peter too. Our willingness to follow, our promises, can become so easily fixed on our own terms and not thought through properly. We think we can bluster through and wing it by sheer force of personality and bravado. But when it comes to it ...

We need to experience the depth of our betrayal and to recognize our human pride and its frail, false image of ourselves before the path is open to resurrection. The breaking comes and must come before the remaking. We can see this in Eucharistic terms as I shall go on to explain more fully tomorrow evening. The bread must be broken before it can be distributed, shared and taken into one's life and the healing work begun. After his triple denial of Jesus

Peter broke down and shed tears of remorse, of penitence, of growing self-awareness: Peter, you are such a boastful, arrogant, conceited and cowardly fool!

How may we find our remaking? By recognising the necessity of the breaking process in us. By trusting whatever comes in the power and grace of God. By discovering within ourselves what it is that God sees and loves in us. We can offer genuine sorrow, and contrition. We can acknowledge just how far we fall short and miss the mark and we can confess in humility. This is penitence. But Jesus calls us to repentance, that is, to a fresh start. But we first need to dig the garden of our souls and clear the weeds. This week we go to the Garden of Gethsemane in sorrow, to the bare hill of Golgotha in acknowledgment of our crucifying sins, to the garden where Jesus was buried and God raised him up. There we shall find healing love and forgiveness. Like Peter returning to his fishing in Galilee, there to encounter the risen Christ and a commissioning restoration, that garden is really our daily lives. There we shall meet the risen Lord and find ourselves loved back into life.