

Maundy Thursday
1 Corinthians 11:23-26 & John 13:1-17, 31b-35
9 April 2009
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

It's already been a long week, and Jesus must know what's coming. Some say that Jesus was gifted with God's own omniscience and knew in advance exactly how events would play out. Of course, Philippians argues compellingly against that view, but even if Jesus weren't gifted with the seer's eye, he must know the game is almost up. He entered Jerusalem four days earlier, and he's done everything possible to antagonize the authorities during the Passover Festival, the one week of the year in which they are the least likely to forgive rabble rousers and causers of disruption. Jesus has made a scene in the Court of the Gentiles, driving out those who sell sacrificial animals and change Roman money into temple coin. He's debated, bested, and even ridiculed every faction that wields any power. And he has reasons to believe that Judas, one close to his own heart, has changed his mind about the Gospel and sided with the devil.

It's bound to be that last that's the hardest to take. We can face many things so long as we know we have the unwavering commitment and support of our friends. But to know that a soul-friend has not only lost faith yet is also actively working against you...that can steal the wind from your sail and sap the very strength from muscle and bone.

Jesus has seen the Herodians pointing at him and whispering at the edge of the crowds. He has witnessed the Sadducees conspiring with the Pharisees, two groups who under normal circumstances are mortal enemies. He has watched the nervous Roman legionnaires patrolling the streets. They're coming for him, and he knows it.

With all this on his heart and mind, Jesus steals into a quiet garden for what he must know is his last opportunity for quiet and peace. But though he prays alone, he knows neither of these things. Jesus the Christ is fully god and fully man, but he is not *Superman*. Bullets don't bounce off his chest, and against his flesh the dagger does not bend. He is not Stoic in the face of danger. In the throes of his anxiety, Jesus trembles. In the anticipation of what is to come, he falters. Mark tells us "He threw himself on the ground" in distress and agitation, and Luke adds with literary flourish, "His sweat became as great drops of blood falling from him."

Let's stop there and ask a question: What is your Garden of Gethsemane? Where in your life is the anxiety so great that you can't think straight, your body reacts in foreign ways, your emotions take on a life of their own? Where does your strength so ebb that you can't lift

yourself off the ground, whether to face pain, combat demons, or repair relationships? Where is your Gethsemane?

Rewind several hours. Jesus is in room with those closest to him in all the world. Though Judas has already betrayed him, Jesus doesn't even exclude him from this gathering. Only the two of them realize what's coming. The others likely cling to the idea that this week in Jerusalem is moving toward a different kind of crescendo, one in which all their hopes will be realized. Patient with their ignorance, Jesus peers at them with piercing eyes, willing in them understanding of the heart where understanding of the mind is absent. He lifts bread from the table and he says, "This is my body" and wine with the words, "This is my blood."

They don't yet understand it, but too soon they will, because Jesus *will* arise in Gethsemane. He will face his betrayer, his captors, Rome's military might, and the Cross. He will face and endure every conceivable physical and emotional trial the world can concoct. He isn't Superman, but he does know God so intimately as to be one with God. This does not spare Jesus anxiety and distress, but it does give him the power to walk into them in faith.

And in the Eucharist, through the bread and the wine, Jesus gives to the disciples—and to us—access to that same power. They have not his strength, nor do we. But he gives us, most literally, *himself* to take into *ourselves*, granting us his faith when and where ours is lacking. The lyricist Philip Riley says it this way:

Slow runs my heart. A summer's bud by winter held. And if in faith my heart should fail, bring to my lips the cup, thine own sweet grail.

And if in faith my heart should fail, bring to my lips the cup, thine own sweet grail. Each and every time we approach the altar rail, we take into ourselves Jesus himself. And when we recognize this, then he mediates his own intimate relationship to God *to us*, and the Gethsemanes in our lives lose just enough of their darkness that we, with Jesus' faith as lantern light, can navigate them.

But there is yet another way that Jesus passes *his* faith on to *us*. In the prayer at this final meal, Jesus reveals that those who love him are destined to become his body in the world when he is gone. "I in them and you in me," he prays to God, "that they may become completely one." The faith of any one of us may not be strong enough to arise in Gethsemane, but the faith of us together surely is. *Together* we embody the faith of Jesus, and when we share that faith through acts of love we share Jesus' power one with another.

In the Upper Room, after the meal, Jesus shows the disciples what this looks like. He gets up from the table, removes his robe, and ties a towel around himself. He bends down onto the dust of the ground and washes the feet of his friends. They—Peter especially—are at first horrified, both at the thought of what Jesus is doing and at the thought of allowing their feet to be washed by him. But this act is a sacrament, no less than what Jesus does with the bread and the wine is a sacrament. Through it Jesus reveals the vulnerability, the humility, and the willingness to risk discomfort that being his body in the world requires. It is not enough, Jesus tells us, to say we love one another. “*Just as I have loved you,*” he says with a back bent by this enacted labor of love, “love one another.”

At some point, we all enter Gethsemane. We all come to those moments where we throw ourselves to the ground in distress and anxiety, when we know that our own strength is too feeble to pick us up again. In those dark places, Jesus stands ready to meet us, in the bread and wine of the Eucharist and in the committed love of one another.

Tonight of all nights, he will walk where we cannot. He will stare into the eyes of death, and he will begin a three day journey that ends when death dies, and we forever live.

If in faith *my* heart should fail, bring to *my* lips the cup, thine own sweet grail. *Amen.*