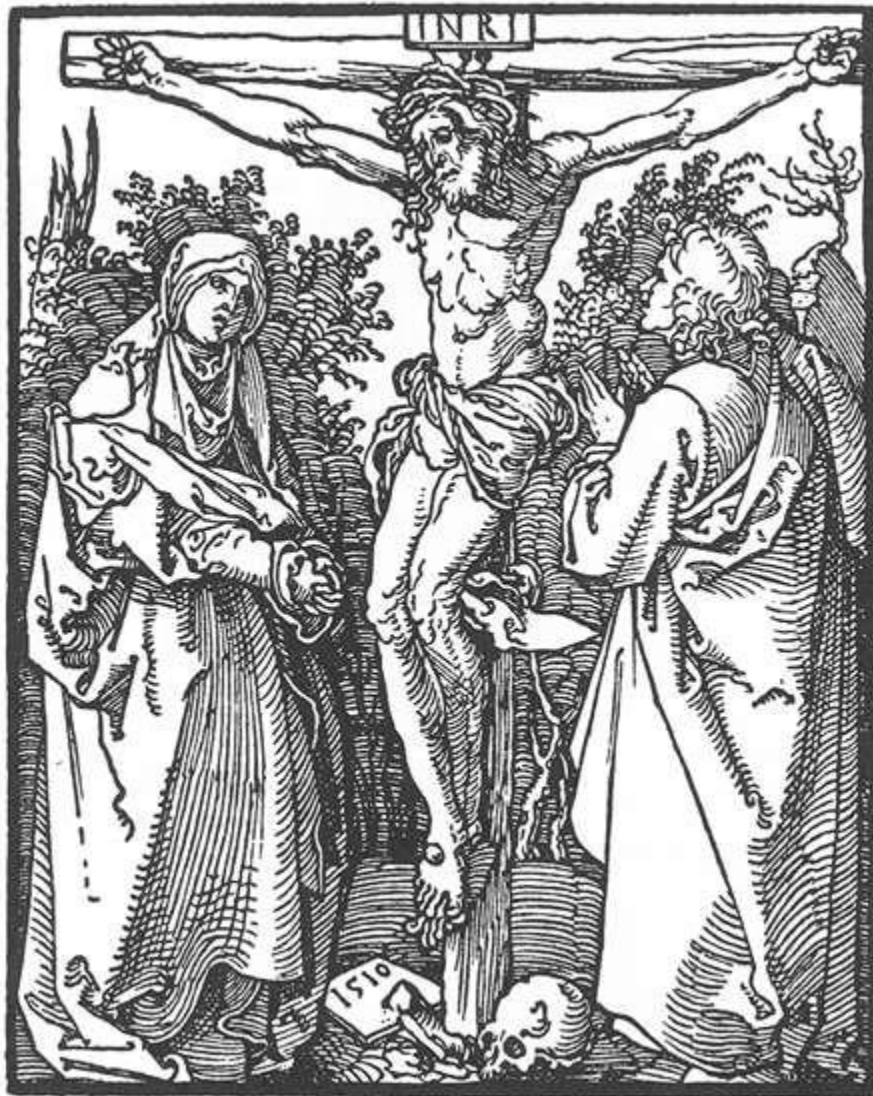


“What mean ye by this service?”

Meditations for Holy Week

2011

(Rev'd) David Curry



*Parish of Christ Church
Windsor, NS*

Palm Sunday

“What mean ye by this service?”

It will be the recurring question for this week. It all begins today, Palm Sunday. It is the beginning of Holy Week, the week of the Passover. Christ is our Passover. But what does that mean?

Our liturgy shows us what it means. It all begins today and ends at Easter. It is one continuous liturgy. Christ crucified and Christ risen. The story captures the whole range of human emotions and experience, the whole range of sin and evil, the whole picture of human redemption. All of it is focussed on the figure of Jesus Christ. In a way, the whole story of Christ is concentrated in the events of this day and week. Palm Sunday makes us confront *the paradox of contradiction* that exists in our own souls.

“Hosanna to the King,” we cry, only to turn around and cry, *“Crucify him.”* The one, a cry of exaltation and delight; the other, a cry of violence and viciousness. This is what we cry. We are not merely by-standers. No. The whole point of Palm Sunday and Holy Week is that we are participants in the drama of human redemption. We are part of the unfolding of the spectacle of human redemption. It is the Passover of the Lord. We are *in* the story of this week.

But what does this mean? The ancient story of the Passover underlies the meaning of this week. Jesus enters triumphantly into Jerusalem. He does so to celebrate the Jewish Passover. Everything that transpires in the spectacle of this week relates to the Passover story.

“What mean ye by this service?” This is the question asked in the ritual of the Passover. It is a memorial service, a way of remembering and re-enacting the Passover, a way of participating in its truth. What is the Passover? Do we know the story? It is the story of the liberation of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage under Pharaoh’s yoke. *“Let my people go,”* Moses said to Pharaoh. Let them go from what? Let them go where and to what? Let them go from the burdens of slavery. Let them go into the wilderness to worship God. Ultimately, it is a story that belongs to the spiritual identity of the people of Israel, the Hebrews, and, by extension, to the spiritual identity of Christians.

What will it take for Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go? A lot. The story of the Passover is the culminating event in a series of contests between the magicians of the Egyptians, on the one hand, and God, on the other hand, acting through Moses and Aaron. There is a series of plagues that befall the land of Egypt. In that series, a distinction is made between the Egyptians and the Hebrews. For example, a plague of flies descends upon the land of Egypt everywhere except where the Hebrews dwell. Literally, there may be flies on some of you guys but not on us in the land of Goshen! So too, with some of the other afflictions, like thick darkness upon the whole land except, again, the land of Goshen which remains in light. A distinction is made between those who define

themselves by the forces of nature and those who worship a power beyond nature for whom nature is but the cloak of his glory.

The lessons here are not just against Egypt. They are also for Israel and through Israel for all people. That, of course, is part of the greater story both of the rest of the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament story of Jesus.

But the spiritual battle in *Exodus* reaches its climax in the story of the Passover. What is that story? It is the last of the plagues and the most disturbing of the plagues. Every time there is a plague, Pharaoh pleads to have it removed and promises to let the people of the Hebrews go, but, then, he hardens his heart and retracts his promise. Such are the fickle ways of human hearts. The hardening of the heart is by no means constrained to just Pharaoh. After all, as Jeremiah puts it, "*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?*" (Jer. 17.9). This, too, is what we confront in the spectacle of Holy Week. We confront the spectacle of our deceitful and fickle hearts, our hearts of treachery and betrayal, our hearts of contradiction and folly.

But *The Book of Exodus* also says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Why? Because liberation and salvation cannot be allowed to depend upon any human action, even the actions of contradiction and sinfulness. Everything has to be brought clearly within the realm of God's free and sovereign action. Moses and Aaron are not superheroes but faithful servants of God's will. That will be the condition of liberation.

The last plague is the death of the first-born, both of man and beast in the land of Egypt. Only on the homes of the Hebrews, where the blood of a lamb has been daubed on the doorposts and lintels, does God, literally, pass over and spare them from the terror of the sudden death of the first-born. This may seem hard and curious. There is a logic to it, of course. Neither you nor I can tell just by looking at some one whether they are or are not the first born in their family. There is no DNA test to tell that. We can know empirically in particular circumstances with respect to what parents and others know from experience but overall and in general? No. This is a form of knowing that exceeds our human knowledge. It is a divine knowing. And that is the point.

Along with the commandment to the Hebrews to sacrifice the passover lamb and to place its blood on the doorposts and lintels of their homes, there is the provision of the passover meal; lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs. Why unleavened bread? Because we have to be ready to leave in a hurry; there is no time for the dough to rise. Israel is commanded to keep this service in perpetuity wherever they go. And when it is observed, the children say to their elders, "*what mean ye by this service?*" The answer is that "*this is the sacrifice of the Lord's passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt*" (Ex. 12.27). Pharaoh lets them go, only to chase after them, it is true, and that leads to the crossing of the Red Sea and the further defeat of Pharaoh's host at the hand of God.

A defining story for the Jewish people, it has its further extension in the Christian story of human redemption. Christ enters Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. He will be the passover lamb himself. *"Christ our passover is sacrificed for us."* It will not be by the blood of sheep and goats but by the blood of Christ that we will be redeemed from the greater enslavement to sin and folly, to wickedness and evil. Holy Week is about the Passion of Christ. He wills to put himself completely in our hands to do with him what we will. It is not a pretty picture. We are not nice. But even more, he puts himself into the hands of his loving father. He has *"come to do the will of him who sent [him]."* That will is the divine will which seeks our good in spite of ourselves. *"God commendeth his love towards us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* We are simply and completely sinners.

It will be our hardened and fickle hearts that will be on display in the spectacle of Holy Week. But even more, the heart of God will be revealed to us in the crucified Christ. His passover is for us.

We may not want to see this. Part of the hardness of our hearts is the way we cling to our own agendas and pretensions and to our own sense of ourselves. What Holy Week sets before us is the idea that we do not really know ourselves and that the true knowledge of ourselves is found in Christ. It is found in the deep love of God for us in the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. *"Christ our passover is sacrificed for us"* so that we may keep the feast of our redemption. It means going into the Passion of Christ and learning *"what mean ye by this service?"*

"What mean ye by this service?"

*Fr. David Curry
Palm Sunday, April 17th, 2011*

Monday in Holy Week

“What mean ye by this service?”

The beginning of the Passion according to St. Mark offers a sequence of rituals which revolve around the opening statement that *“after two days was the feast of the Passover, and of unleavened bread.”*

Mark’s account of the Passion includes the breaking open of the alabaster box of ointment of spikenard and the anointing of his head with the precious oil. It includes Judas’ plan to betray Christ to the chief priests for money; the preparation for the celebration of the Passover by the disciples; the amazing statements at the ritual meal of the Passover by Jesus; the prophecy of Peter’s betrayal of Jesus; the singing of an hymn and proceeding to Gethsemane to pray; the betrayal of Jesus by the kiss of Judas; the trial and mockery of Jesus. The beginning of the passion concludes with Peter’s denial and his conviction of conscience when the cock crew twice. For then *“Peter called to mind the word that Jesus said unto him ... and when he thought thereon he wept.”*

It is quite a sequence. It reveals our hearts of treachery and betrayal, our hearts of love and devotion, as well as our divided and sleepy hearts. It is not exactly a pretty picture of ourselves and our humanity.

“What mean ye by this service?” This is the question of the Passover. The opening scene of this beginning of Mark’s account of the passion is most intriguing and important. The unnamed woman does an extravagant thing. She breaks open an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard and she anoints Jesus head. What does it mean?

Her action elicits an initial critical response from some of the guests in the house of Simon the Leper. They think this is a terrible waste of a resource which could be better used by being sold and the proceeds being used to feed the poor. An understandable and even laudable point of view. And yet, Jesus’ response is direct and unequivocal. *“Let her alone; why trouble ye her? She hath wrought a good work on me: for ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good; but me ye have not always. She hath done what she could; she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying.”*

It is a remarkable response. And a rebuke, really, to the all too common desire to have the Gospel and religion serve the immediate interests of the world. The work of relieving the poor must be grounded in the worship of God. The response reveals Jesus’ understanding of the human condition and his understanding of her action. Her act is an act of loving service, an act of worship. She is anointing his body aforehand for his burying. Her action identifies with Christ in his willing and loving sacrifice for us. What her service means is love. It is the *one* good word which can be said about us in this beginning of the passion, the one good word which stands out against the background

of betrayal and the miscarriage of justice, the background of our fickle and contradictory hearts.

The crucifixion will be about the breaking open of the veined alabaster, if you will, of the body of Christ. Body broken and blood outpoured. Her act of love anticipates his passion and death at Calvary. She has poured out the precious ointment of spikenard – a burial spice. But something even more precious will flow out of the wounded and broken side of the Crucified Christ. Out of his wounded side flow the life-giving and life-sustaining sacraments of the Church.

Here in the Upper Room furnished and prepared, Jesus prepares us for the form of his being with us sacramentally: *“Take eat, this is my body ... This is my blood of the covenant, which is shed for many.”* It all points to the Cross and to the crucified Christ. It all points to what is meant by this service. It is about nothing less than Jesus in the totality of his love for us. We can only weep with Peter at the discovery of our incomplete and fickle loves, of our betrayals of Jesus whether with a kiss, like Judas, or by the claims of loyalty, like Peter. And yet, that is to begin to learn *“what mean ye by this service”*.

“What mean ye by this service?”

Fr. David Curry
Monday in Holy Week, April 18th, 2011

Tuesday in Holy Week

“What mean ye by this service?”

This question, which frames our reflections during Holy Week, takes on a disturbing quality of intensity on Tuesday in Holy Week. Why? Because it is not a pretty picture of ourselves at all. What is our service in the continuation of the Passion according to St. Mark? Well, it is simply more and more of the ugly spectacle of betrayal and hatred, of mockery and violence.

“What mean ye by this service?” What we see and hear is Pontius Pilate’s unwilling and unjust surrender of Jesus to the will of the crowd, being *“willing to content the people.”* That is itself an indictment of human justice. What we see and hear is the motivating principle that places Jesus in our hands. It is the *“envy”* of the Chief Priests. Envy is the most destructive of all the deadly sins. And the most ugly. It is about hatred. That theme, too, is more than amply explored in the First Lesson for Evening Prayer from the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon and then even more directly stated in the Second Lesson from the Gospel according to St. John. *“He who hates me hates my Father also.”*

And that is all part of the spectacle of this holy week. What is on display is the human capacity to hate the good or to be more specific and more horrific, to hate God. Ultimately, our hatred of God is what is visited upon Jesus. This is the darkness at the heart of the Passion.

We see a sequence of scenes through Mark’s eyes. First, there is Pilate’s abdication of justice; freeing the murderer Barabbas and giving Christ into the hands of his persecutors full knowing his innocence. Those who cried *“Hosanna,”* now cry *“crucify”* and with an ugly intensity. Secondly, there is the mockery of Jesus by the soldiers of Pilate as if drawing upon the blood-lust of what are simply and telling called *“the people.”* Thirdly, there is Simon the Cyrenian whom *“they compel ... to bear his cross.”* There is everything in the verb, compel. Force and coercion; in short, violence is everywhere in the story of the Passion on our part.

At the heart of the Continuation of the Passion according to St. Mark is the hideous and yet poignant spectacle of the crucifixion itself with the repeated irony of the superscription. Jesus has been constantly referred to by Pilate as *“the King of the Jews.”* An ironic title, it captures so many of the ambiguities of power for ancient Israel at the same time as it expresses a deep truth about Jesus. But even in the face of the crucified, there is the further spectacle of dismissive mockery. Jesus is reviled by those who *“were crucified with him.”*

All in all it is not a pretty picture. Two things are on display here. The ultimate picture of human hatred and sin and the absolute picture of divine love and compassion. There

is only one word from the Crucified in Mark's account (and Matthew's, too), and that is the cry of dereliction and abandonment. And yet, that, too, is actually a prayer. *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

"What mean ye by this service?" On the one hand, human perfidy, hatred and violence; on the other hand, Christ's willingness to bear the full brunt and force of our abandonment of God and our dereliction of truth and justice. Just so are we allowed to see the true nature of human sin. Each and every sin is captured in the story of the Crucified. Each and every sin is about our abandonment of God. Each and every sin is about the folly of trying to do away with God. And Christ Crucified feels acutely that sin and folly and voices it completely in a prayer that, at least, addresses God.

The full force of our human violence, the violence of evil, is heard in this solitary word from the cross. It is a prayer, though, that is addressed to God, and not to the Father. It is simply directed to God. That is powerful. Why? Because it belongs to the question of the Passover. *"What mean ye by this service?"* We are meant to see ourselves in all of the sorry spectacle of our disorders, confusions and disarray; even more, in the full horror of human sinfulness so graphically captured in the hideous spectacle of Christ Crucified. But more than ourselves, we are meant to see Christ in the full agony of the Cross and, yet, in prayer to God. And in seeing that it may be possible, just possible by the grace of Christ, to proclaim as the Centurion proclaims, *"truly this man was the son of God."* And then, and only then, shall we have learned something.

"What mean ye by this service?"

*Fr. David Curry
Tuesday in Holy Week, April 19th, 2011*

Wednesday in Holy Week

“What mean ye by this service?”

Tenebrae is a Latin word meaning shadows or darkness. In the pageant of Holy Week, the service of *Tenebrae* anticipates aspects of the *Triduum Sacrum*, the three great holy days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday that bring us to the celebration of Easter.

It signals a greater degree of intensity and a more inward emphasis. So much of the violence of Holy Week, the violence of hatred and anger that lurks in our fallen hearts, is expressed outwardly. But on *the Wednesday in Holy Week* there is a more inward turn. This greater degree of inwardness is expressed in the psalms and readings of *Tenebrae* as we enter more fully into Christ’s passion. It is also an important feature of the Passion Gospel which is read on this day. On Wednesday in Holy Week, we read the Beginning of the Passion according to St. Luke.

The purpose and intent of Holy Week, especially in our Anglican understanding and practice, is to immerse ourselves in the fullness of the Scriptural witness to the Passion of Christ. That is why all four passion accounts from the four canonical gospels are read throughout Holy Week. On Palm Sunday, we read the Passion according to St. Matthew. On Monday and Tuesday of Holy Week, we read the Passion according to St. Mark. Today, on Wednesday in Holy Week, we begin reading the Passion according to St. Luke which we will conclude on Maundy Thursday. On Good Friday, the Passion according to St. John will be read. It is the complete packet of the Passion.

Each gospel account of the Passion provides a different perspective and has a distinct emphasis. Are there inconsistencies in terms of the details? Yes. Are there any major discrepancies that have any bearing on the basic and fundamental teaching about the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ? No. To appreciate the differences is to grasp the deeper and credal unity of the Christian understanding.

Luke’s account of the Passion provides a more inward aspect to the Passion. We see this, I think, in several ways. In accord with our Passover question, we have the institution of the Last Supper as we have seen with Mark. Christ has entered into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with his disciples. The Passover ritual is profoundly transformed by the identity which Christ establishes with the bread and the wine of the Passover meal. With Luke, too, there is a further degree of intensity about the betrayal of the table-fellowship and an emphasis on the theme of covenant. Something new is being established by Jesus. *“I make a covenant with you, as my Father has made a covenant with me.”*

The language of covenant is powerful and suggestive language. It speaks to the divine will and purpose that underlies the Passion. It also heightens the human drama both in terms of the betrayals of sin and the blessings of redemption. There is an intensification of the covenant between our humanity and God transacted in the Passion of Christ and conveyed in the ritual of the Last Supper.

There is also the greater degree of inwardness captured in the curious dialogue between Peter and Christ at the last supper where Jesus shows his understanding of the conflict and contradictions between good and evil in the soul; specifically, the soul of Peter. At once prophetic of Peter's betrayal, it also anticipates Peter's conversion or repentance and suggests his role in the order of the nascent Church. It is, as if Jesus sees into the soul of Peter.

But the most outstanding example of this inward turn is the picture of Christ in what has come to be called "*the agony of Gethsemane*." Luke gives us a picture of the soul of Christ, a soul in turmoil, a soul in agony. It brings out the tension, we might say, between the human and the divine. Christ prays "*Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done.*" Beyond these poignant words, Luke adds a powerful picture of the intensity of Christ in prayer. "*And being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.*" Agony. His sweat likened to great drops of blood. It is a strong visual image for the inner condition of the human soul of Christ. It reveals the inner nature of the *agone*, the struggle.

We are, I think, meant to feel the passion of Christ in his prayer to the Father.

The turn inward has its finest literary expression, I think, in Luke's account of the story of Peter's betrayal of Christ. In Luke's account, Jesus says to Peter that "*the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me.*" Mark has Jesus say "*before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice.*" Matthew indicates the same as Luke, "*the cock shall not crow this day, until you three times deny that you know me.*" Does it really matter? Can one possibly know which it is? No. Just some of the little and human touches to the witness of the truth of the Scriptures. But Luke gives an added touch to the poignancy of Peter's recognition of his betrayal of Christ. "*The cock crew,*" Luke notes, and, then, relates "*and the Lord turned and looked upon Peter; and Peter remembered the word of the Lord.*" And in remembering, he not only goes out and weeps; he "*wept bitterly.*"

Here we glimpse something of the intensity of the Passion. Here we see something for us in our relation to what we contemplate and behold in the events of the week of the Passover. "*What mean ye by this service?*" We are meant to be convicted in our hearts like Peter. We behold the crucified but it will be the image of Christ looking upon us that will break our hearts. His look upon Peter, I think, is a look of compassion and mercy. It

is not harsh judgment. The look of Christ is about his knowing us better than we know ourselves. It is about what is known in the shadows and the darkness of our souls. It belongs to the meaning of this service.

“What mean ye by this service?”

Fr. David Curry

Wednesday in Holy Week, April 20th, 2011

Maundy Thursday

“What mean ye by this service”

Maundy Thursday marks the beginning of the most intense part of the Passion of Christ. It is the beginning of the *Triduum Sacrum*, the three great holy days which concentrate our attention on the Passion of Christ and on the forms of our participation in his Passion.

The word “*maundy*” is the englishting of the Latin *mandatum*, meaning commandment. It refers explicitly to Christ’s words in John’s Gospel, “*a new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another.*” A new commandment? How so? Because of what transpires in this week of the Passover. Christ unites the love of God and the love of one another. That is the love that is on display in the Passion of Christ. And that is the love which is set before us on this night, this “*very night that he was betrayed.*”

“*What mean ye by this service?*” Maundy Thursday is especially the night of services. There is the ritual of the *pedilavium* in which Christ washes the feet of his disciples. It is the powerful illustration of service that dovetails with the theme of sacrifice. That is the actual occasion for Christ’s new commandment to “*love one another, even as I have loved you.*” There are the customs and traditions of royal offerings, called Maundy purses or Maundy coins, given as a form of charity. There is the tradition of stripping the altar, an image of the desolation of Christ as a result of human sin. But at the heart of it all is the institution of the Holy Communion at the Last Supper.

The poignancy and irony of this should not be lost on us. Christ has entered Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover meal with his friends and followers. It is an intimate scene. And yet, it is the scene of betrayal, the betrayal of friendship and fellowship. Yet, that is the context for the most extraordinary thing. Christ identifies himself with the Passover. He identifies himself with the unleavened bread and the wine-cup of thanksgiving which are part of the ancient rituals of the Passover. The connection is blindingly clear. Christ is our Passover. As Paul will note, “*Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.*” It will actually become part of our Easter proclamation. Here in the context of the Passover meal, Christ establishes the means of his being with us even as our betrayals signify his forthcoming passion and death.

On the very eve of his crucifixion and death, Christ provides the love-tokens of his “*full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.*” We are unable to contemplate this without reference to the cross and passion of Christ. In a way, the Passion of Christ concentrates for us the special nature of this service. It gives added poignancy to the meaning of Holy Communion. It helps us to appreciate the wonder and the mystery of his body broken and his blood out-poured, the very things which transpire on the Cross.

Christ's love and our betrayals of that love. There, in a nutshell, we have the meaning of Holy Week. Our regular liturgy, of course, constantly reminds us of these two things. Our sinfulness is made the occasion of Christ's redemptive love. His love "*bears all things, believes all things, hopes for all things, endures all things,*" as Paul suggests, for "*love never fails.*" Here is the deep love of God which wills to bear all our sins and in so doing makes them visible to us and overcomes them. Love is something, indeed, love is everything; sin is nothing.

But to embrace the new commandment to love one another means to contemplate our own sinfulness in the figure of the Crucified. Tonight we discover just how fickle and inconstant our affections really are. We discover how in our own sins we are all Judas. We betray him with a kiss. We betray him in our betrayals of one another.

At Durham Cathedral in the north of England, there is another ritual on Maundy Thursday. It is the ceremony of the Judas cup. A special mazer bowl is used from which to drink the sacrament of the new covenant, the consecrated wine. At the bottom of the bowl is an image of Judas. We are meant to see ourselves mirrored in the figure of Judas. We are meant to see how our sins betray the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ. We are meant to see and to be convicted in our own hearts about our betrayals of God. We, too, are Judas.

Betrayed at the table of fellowship, betrayed by his friends, Christ goes to his passion. We are meant to go with him to Gethsemane; we are meant to go with him to his trial and crucifixion; we are meant to go with him to his death and grave. We contemplate all that belongs to our unloveliness, to be sure. But it is only his love that makes it possible and necessary for us to go with him. Out of the hell of our refusals of God's love, God makes the heaven of our redemption. Such is the power of the divine love, the love which sustains us in the meaning of his passion through the sacrament.

The Christ who carries himself in his own hands this night places himself in our hands to do with him what we will. It is not a pretty picture. At every service of holy Communion, too, he is placed in our hands. How will we receive him? With grateful hearts of faith? At once convicted of our unworthiness and convinced of the greater power of his love, I hope. For then, and only then, shall we have learned something about the question: "*What mean ye by this service?*"

"What mean ye by this service"

*Fr. David Curry
Maundy Thursday, April 21st, 2011*

Good Friday

“What mean ye by this service?”

This has been the question that has framed our Holy Week meditations. It reaches its climax in this service on this day which we are privileged to call Good Friday. Christ is crucified. Christ is dead. What, indeed, do we mean by this service?

Simply put, we behold him who we have pierced, as Zechariah prophesied and as we hear at the end of the Passion according to John. We behold Christ Crucified and dead on the Cross. That is the most basic answer to the question. But like so many questions, it only opens us out to more and more questions. Why is Christ crucified? What does it mean? Who crucified Christ? The questions are as disturbing as the answers.

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” So goes the old spiritual. The question is not merely rhetorical. Of course, in a literal sense we weren't there. The crucifixion was long ago and far away. And yet, in a metaphorical sense, the sense of the hymn itself, and theologically, we are there. And even more, we are they who crucified our Lord.

That is part and parcel of the deeper meaning of this Good Friday service and, indeed, of Holy Week itself. We have no one else to blame for Christ Crucified but ourselves. Not the Jews, not the Romans, not some conspirators' plot to pull a fast one on the gullible, not some Gnostic nonsense about a body switch or an elaborate act of deception. No. The whole point of Holy Week and, especially, Good Friday is that we have to take ownership for the crucifixion.

Oh, I know, it sounds like a heavy guilt trip. Clergy and Church trying to make people feel bad in order to milk them of their wealth. All a kind of power trip. But no. None of that really works or makes any real sense of what we have been given to see in the pageant of Holy Week. It is not, I think, really all that difficult to see ourselves in this story. It is not, I think, really all that difficult to take note of the ugliness and the vanity of our sins and follies. It is not, I think, really all that hard to see how fickle and fey our hearts can be.

We can, at the very least, I hope, recognize the potentiality in our own souls for most, if not all, of the hideous spectacles of human behavior on display in the story of the Crucified Christ. It is, simply put, about the total parade of human sin. All of it, past, present and future, is embraced in the spectacle of the Crucified. That is why Paul can say that *“he hath made him [to be] sin for us, who knew no sin.”* Christ, the sinless one, was made sin for us. The whole and complete packet of sin is made visible on the Cross. It is what we do. We have done our worse. And all is done. We have had our way with God in Christ. He hangs dead on the Cross.

"What makes this rage and spite?" So asks Samuel Crossman in his poignant hymn, *"My Song is Love Unknown,"* set to a wonderful melody in John Ireland's tune *"Love Unknown."* The hymn captures the meaning of our service. We confront the hideous spectacle of ourselves. But, even more, we behold the awesome love of God for us in the figure of Christ Crucified. What is meant to be awakened in us is an understanding, or at least the glimpse of an understanding, of that love unknown.

Here might I stay and sing,
No story so divine;
Never was love, dear King,
Never was grief like thine.
This is my Friend,
In whose sweet praise
I all my days
Could gladly spend.

The solemn liturgy of Good Friday places us with Christ in his death for us. The service is meant to convict us and to convince us. The *"two vast and spacious things,"* as George Herbert puts it, are *"sin and love"* and *"yet few there are that sound them,"* meaning measure or know them. Both are completely on display in Holy Week and, most especially, in the spectacle of Good Friday. It belongs to the meaning of this service for us to sound them. For if we can behold him crucified and know his love, then, this is truly Good Friday. For it means that we can behold our sins in him and know in Christ Crucified the power of the forgiveness of sins.

Forgiveness and reconciliation belong to the meaning of this service. Christ's death is our forgiveness. Christ's death reconciles us to God. God looks at us and sees his Son. That is our salvation. But it can only happen if we, too, are looking at Christ Crucified.

To behold the Crucified is to be in sorrow for our sins which crucify him. But even more, it is to discover the divine love that conquers sin and death. There lies the possibility of our sorrows being turned into joy.

And in a way, the motions of the Resurrection already begin to happen. Out of the side of the dead and crucified Christ flow water and blood. They will become the signs and symbols of the Sacraments of the Church, the forms of our life-giving participation in the salvation which God seeks for us while we were yet sinners. *"What mean ye by this service?"* is our participation in the divine work of human redemption. To look on him whom we have pierced is to begin to learn *"what mean ye by this service."*

"What mean ye by this service"

Fr. David Curry
Good Friday, April 22nd, 2011

Holy Saturday

“What mean ye by this service?”

Holy Saturday is the quietest and most peaceful of all the days of the Christian year. Why? Because all the noise and nonsense of our fallen and broken humanity has had its way, right to the bitter end. God has put himself into our hands and we have done our worst. Christ is dead. Christ now lies buried in a borrowed grave. In one way, we are a spent force.

But it is the quietest and most peaceful day for another reason. *“It is finished,”* Christ said on the Cross in what is the penultimate word of the Crucified. His last word, too, signifies the fuller meaning of that sense of completion. *“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”* But what is finished? What is in his spirit that is placed into the hands of his Father? Simply all that belongs to human redemption. It is all accomplished. There is peace between God and man.

Holy Saturday is paradise restored. It recalls the original harmony between God and man and between nature and God. That, too, is part of the peace and quiet of this day. But that sense of paradise restored is only part of the meaning of this day. Paradise in the biblical and theological understanding is not our homeland, not our end. Our end is with God in the glory of heaven. That is something more and greater than Paradise. It is, perhaps, Paradise plus! For we cannot return to Eden.

We cannot undo the effects of the fall, the effects of sin and folly. The purpose of Holy Week, after all, was to make us more fully aware of sin so as to understand better Christ’s overcoming of sin. Sin and love have been fully on display throughout the pageant of Holy Week. I hope that we have learned something about our selves and about God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. The purpose has not been for us to forget our sins and their disastrous and deadly consequences. No. The purpose has been to see the divine work of human redemption transforming our sins into his righteousness and truth..

And now, all is accomplished. But the further sense of that *all* is quietly signalled as well on this day. The lessons indicate the radical nature of the divine will to be reconciled with the whole of his sinful creation. We hear of Christ *“go[ing] and preach[ing] to the spirits in prison,” “set[ting] captives free from the waterless pit,” restor[ing] the prisoners of hope,”* and about ourselves as wayward sheep being *“returned to the Shepherd and guardian of our souls.”* Powerful images.

Something of the radical meaning of the divine will to be reconciled with the whole of his sinful creation is captured in the creedal statement that *“he descended into Hell.”* It is also captured in a wonderful icon that is part of the spirituality of the churches of

Eastern Christianity. It is the icon of Christ going and drawing out of Hell, Adam and Eve and the host of those whom Zechariah calls "*the prisoners of hope.*" This is all part of the doctrine of Holy Saturday. Hell here means the place of departed spirits. The idea is that Christ's redemptive work is truly universal and seeks the redemption of all. But we have to want it. We have to be looking for it.

These features of Holy Saturday catapult us into the second aspect of Holy Saturday's peace and quiet. It is also a day of waiting, a waiting upon God, a waiting upon the possibilities of a new and radical beginning. We await Christ's resurrection. For that is the fruit of the passion and the quiet of this day. The tomb becomes the womb of new life. A new creation. Such is the resurrection. But we can only wait for it, looking for that great something more that God in his gracious mercy wills to give us.

"What mean ye by this service?"

*Fr. David Curry
Holy Saturday, April 23rd, 2011*