

Remembering **Maundy Thursday**

A few weeks ago our eldest son celebrated his thirtieth birthday. Our present to him was a photograph album. I went through thirty years of photographs, some in albums, some in ring binders, some stuffed in shoe boxes, some digital - and put together all the ones that related to James in a single album to remind him of his first thirty years. He seemed to like it – and I certainly enjoyed reliving all those family events – especially those ones that I had forgotten.

Is this what Jesus mean when at the Last Supper he said 'do this to remember me?' Did he mean that whenever we come to mass we should mentally and spiritually go back two thousand years and engage in a time of religious nostalgia?

I do not think that was his primary meaning – even if remembering the story of the last supper is a good thing. I think there are two other ways of interpreting his words.

First we need to note that the idea of remembering in worship was actually quite familiar to the people of Jesus's time. For example, as the Israelites wandered through desert in the forty years between leaving Egypt and entering the promised land, God gave Moses instructions on how they are to worship him:

Also on your days of rejoicing, at your appointed festivals, and at the beginnings of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over your sacrifices of well-being; they shall serve as a reminder on your behalf before the Lord your God: I am the Lord your God.

Number 10:10

What is, perhaps rather surprising is that the trumpets are not to remind the people of Israel to worship God but to remind God to look after the people of Israel.

Now you are probably not very familiar with detailed instructions from the Book of Numbers about the offering of sacrifice. But you will know the story of Noah; and you will know about the rainbow. What you may not have noted, and I did not until this very afternoon, is that the rainbow serves not as a reminder to us but as reminder to God:

When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.

Genesis 9:6

So if the rainbow and the sacrifice offered by Aaron are done to remind God of his covenant with his people, then perhaps the mass acts as a reminder in the same way – to God.

In fact the words of the Eucharistic Prayers reinforce this idea. You will recall that the Eucharistic Prayer is the consecration of the bread and wine which begins with the dialogue between priest and people"

The Lord be with you,
Lift up your hearts and
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

In fact the Eucharistic prayer has three distinct sections. The first, which culminates in singing 'Holy Holy' is a hymn of praise – words that vary according to the season of the church's year. After the 'Holy Holy' we hear the account of the last supper with Jesus own words as recorded by St Paul. This is followed by the acclamation – 'Christ has died' or other suitable words.

The third part that follows has a rather fancy Greek name – anamnesis – which simply means 'remembrance'. The words vary slightly from one prayer to another but in essence we are nudging God's arm. We are reminding the father that his son died for us when we say,

And so Father, calling to mind his death on the cross,
his perfect sacrifice made once for the sins of the whole world.

We are offering him our own sacrifice of praise when we say,

As we offer you this our sacrifice of prayer and thanksgiving

And then we make our prayer on the strength of that

Send your Holy Spirit on your people
and gather into one on your kingdom
all who share his one bread and one cup.

Common Worship Eucharistic Prayer B

It is not uncommon for a priest to include specific intentions at this point most commonly the insertion of a name, often for someone who has died. And it is a common practice for Christians to attend the mass with a specific prayer request which they might recall at this point in the service.

But there is another significance of the remembering. And we understand this by asking what might be the opposite of 'to remember'. The obvious answer is 'to forget'. But let me ask you to consider 'dismember'. To dismember is to take apart the various parts of a body. To re-member is to put them back together again. Jesus' physical personal body was not altogether dismembered in a literal sense but it was certainly broken and damaged. But his body the church was certainly dismembered. It had already been breaking up even before the last supper. On the way to Jerusalem they had been squabbling about who was the greatest (Mark 9:33); then James and John came to him to ask for special privilege – 'let us sit one at your right hand and the other at your left when you come in glory.' But then after the last supper they all fled and dispersed (Mark 14:50); Judas betrayed him; Peter denied him and Thomas just wanted to give up.

But the truth is they were not much better after the resurrection: they hid behind a locked door and different members of the group continually met Jesus and failed to recognize him. The Body of Christ was truly dismembered.

But the story of the early church is undoubtedly a story of the Body of Christ being re-membered, put together again by the Holy Spirit. Once the Spirit had come down on them they were changed men and women; they went out and spoke boldly of their faith; they got themselves organized: they created new apostles or as we would call them 'bishops'; they created elders or as we might call them 'priests'. And when attention to practical matters took them away from teaching and preaching they created deacons or as we might call them 'churchwardens'.

So when we come to the mass perhaps we need to have in mind all three aspects of remembering:

- 1 We call to mind ourselves the death of Jesus, all he did for us and the way that God has worked with his people for four thousand years;
- 2 We remind God himself of the covenant based on the death of Jesus;
- 3 We pray for and open ourselves to the renewal of the church, the body of Christ equipped and empowered to serve the world. And to wash feet.

N Clews

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