



Opening Prayer for Maundy Thursday

God of friendship and faithfulness,
**we've come together this evening
to remember the last meal Jesus shared with friends,
having first become the servant and washed their feet,
before his anguish and arrest in the garden.
Help us to be faithful disciples of Christ,
in good times and bad times,
and through the Holy Spirit,
strengthen the ties of friendship and fellowship
that bind us to one another in faith, hope and love. Amen**

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Has your discipleship ever been seriously put to the test? What took place, and how did you handle the situation?

Psalm of the Day – Psalm 116:1 – 2, 12 – 19

Prayers of Renewal

Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him,
they needed to deny themselves,
and take up their crosses.
God calls us into that same movement
of dying to sin and rising again with Christ.

In this quiet space for reflection,
let us bring to God those things in need of renewal:

Silence is kept for a few moments...

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
grant us peace.

God of our journeys and false starts and new beginnings,
you walk with us all of our days,
and nothing in life or death or all creation
can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ.

Thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,
share with us in our worries and struggles,
and lead us onwards into fullness of life.

We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus. **Amen**

Reading Matthew 26:17 – 29

Sermon

It had been an action-packed week in the run-up to Passover. Jesus had arrived into Jerusalem in deeply symbolic and powerful fashion, and proceeded that same day to bring the work of the Temple to an abrupt standstill, proclaiming it to be a sanctuary for those pursuing unjust ways of living. The following days saw him drawn into debate with members of varied Jewish groups who looked to challenge him, and he had been betrayed, by one of his friends, to religious leaders seeking a stealthy way to arrest him. Everything Jesus said and did

up to this crucial point was about challenging a 'domination system', which benefitted the Roman imperial powers controlling the regions of Judea and Samaria, and their delegated local collaborators within the Temple hierarchy, but drove many thousands of ordinary people into gnawing hunger and crippling debt.

Now, the day of the Passover feast, during which unleavened bread would be shared, and a spotless lamb sacrificed, had arrived. Jesus was aware that the noose was tightening, given the hostility of those he had challenged, and he might well have suspected that his arrest and execution were imminent. Indeed, he would warn his expectant disciples that his time was near (26:18) as he sent them out to make preparations for the meal, having issued them with strict instructions as to who to look out for and what to say, and so the stage was set. What we now call the Last Supper is packed with rich meaning, set against the context of a betrayal by one of the twelve who shared in it that night. As we will hear later on, it was not just Judas who would demonstrate failed discipleship; Peter would deny knowing Jesus in order to save himself, and the rest of the men would abandon Jesus when he was arrested, in the Garden of Gethsemane. Indeed, much of Matthew's account of the Maundy Thursday supper is devoted to exploring failed discipleship when the chips were down. For all this, however, it was nonetheless *those* imperfect folks who participated in the breaking, blessing and sharing of bread identified with Jesus' body and drinking of the cup of wine that he named the blood of the covenant, poured out for many (26:26 – 29).

Looking in upon the Last Supper is like looking through a prism, that scatters light in different ways depending on how we rotate it. There are multiple meanings and connections to be found. It continued the practice Jesus had developed of *sharing meals*, as a key part of his ministry. He had often been criticised for practicing radical inclusion, by eating with outcasts, those branded as sinners, and marginalised people, amid a deeply hierarchical and sharply boundaried context.

However, as much as these meals were significant in both religious (against those excluding others in God's name) and political (laying out a radical vision of how the world might work) terms, we must not forget they were also about the *food itself*, about being nourished at a time when hunger was a huge survival issue. We might think back to the Lord's Prayer, and its injunction about daily bread: enough to eat that day.

Thinking about justice leads us to another meaning, in that this meal was (unlike in John's Gospel, which has different timing) a *Passover meal*. There are clear resonances with that story of the exodus from Egypt, which was recalled during the meal, and eating the Passover lamb had two key purposes. Firstly, it reminded people of how blood from the lamb had been put on the doorposts of Israelite houses, to protect them from the 'destroying angel' (Exodus 12:23). Secondly, as the people were shortly to flee, it was food for the journey, led by Moses, to freedom from captivity and oppression. Yet, all this wasn't and isn't simply about the retelling of the story of that first Passover, but 'bringing it into the present'. Having had the privilege of sharing, albeit via Zoom, in a Passover *Seder* one year, being reminded that we too have been liberated from slavery by God was very powerful. Finally, by having everyone present (including Judas!) eating bread-as-body and drink of blood-as-wine, Jesus attempted to invite those disciples to journey through crucifixion to resurrection with him, just as he had already told them they needed to take up their cross, and follow him upon the road of losing their lives in order to rescue them. In short, this meal was about *authentic discipleship* at a point where the demands of this were becoming all too clear.

Hence, there is a multiplicity of meanings at work: radical hospitality, bodily nourishment, abundance and justice, liberation from captivity and participation in death and resurrection. Yet, I wonder how much of this, if anything, penetrated the whirlwind of anxious thoughts that Jesus almost certainly set rushing through his disciples' heads, with

talk of betrayal and death? Later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, his three closest friends, those had been present at the Transfiguration, failed to remain awake, and when the moment came it would be via the kiss of another that he was handed over, to the chief priests and scribes and elders, to be interrogated. It is all too easy and tempting, as modern readers, to rush to judgement on Peter and Judas, John and James, and rest of the Twelve. However, the lesson of Maundy Thursday is that *we too* need liberation, for there's something of the men who betrayed, denied and fled within each of us. Very few may honestly say that we have never shied away from the costs of being disciples when the chips are down. Yet, the remarkable thing is that, despite all of our human failings, God-in-Christ still calls us to come to the table and participate in divine love through gift and meal, even though God knows how we will betray, deny and flee. God does not love us because we are good, but makes us good through loving us to the end even when we falter and fail. For this radical and amazing grace, poured out through Jesus, thanks be to God!

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

Father, on this night on which he was betrayed,
your Son Jesus Christ washed his disciples' feet
and said that they ought to wash one another's feet.
We commit to follow his example of love and service
Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

On this night, Jesus prayed for his disciples to be one.
We pray for the unity of your Church
in this nation and throughout the world.
Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

On this night, Jesus prayed for those who believe in him.
We pray for the mission of your Church

as we navigate these uncertain times we now face,
and continue to seek new ways of showing your love.
Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

On this night, Jesus commanded his disciples to love,
but suffered rejection himself.
We pray for those who are rejected and unloved,
for those sleeping on the streets or in cramped housing,
for the housebound and the lonely,
for those struggling with mental health issues.
Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

On this night Jesus reminded his disciples
that if the world hated them, it first hated him.
We pray for those who're persecuted for their faith,
and seek repentance for those times
when the Church has been the persecutor.
Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

On this night, Jesus told his disciples
that he was going to prepare a place for them.
We remember in your presence
all who have died in the past year,
and those who have been bereaved.
Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you,
God of endless grace and love...

Lord's Prayer

Reading Matthew 26:32 – 56

The worship fades into silence...