

## A Meditation for Maundy Thursday

By Father David Beresford

Jesus and his disciples gather in the Upper Room to celebrate the Passover, an annual feast which commemorates the release of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. It is the last time they will be together before the crucifixion of Jesus. On this occasion, which is also known as the Last Supper, Jesus teaches the disciples about the kingdom of God, which is most profoundly given in two actions which, in their small way, would profoundly change the way they think about God and about each other.

In the first of these actions, Jesus shares bread and wine with his friends - Jesus calls them "friends" - and he shares the bread and wine with them. Nothing unusual about that - but this time Jesus says something extraordinary: He takes the bread and says: "This is my body". He then takes the cup and says: "this cup is the new covenant in my blood". The new covenant, the new testament, the new promise, is what Jesus offers his friends. The old covenant, the old testament, the old promise, which is faithfulness to God through the law, is expanded into faithfulness to God through the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus will say later: "As you Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me". (Jn 17:21). There is no longer any separation between God and man, heaven and earth: in the Eucharist we are made one in the body and blood of Christ.

The only adequate response to this generous and amazing gift is to be thankful - indeed, thankfulness is the meaning of the Greek word *eucharistia*. The early Church understood the significance of the Eucharist and started putting their thoughts into words. Here is an extract from the liturgy of St. James, from around the 4th century AD:

That they [the bread and the wine] might serve for all who partake of them for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal life, for the sanctification of souls and bodies, for bearing fruit in good works, and for the strengthening of your holy, catholic Church, which you founded on the *rock* of faith, so that *the powers of death shall not prevail against it* (Matt. 16:18), saving it from all division and from the offenses of evildoers and from the enemies who have risen against it and continue to rise up until the end of the ages.

Sometimes the generosity of God overwhelms us. At the Last Supper, one of Jesus' friends, a rather important one, struggled with what Jesus did next, which was this: he washed the disciples' feet.

At that time most people wore sandals and journeyed by foot. The roads and paths were dusty and dirty - when it rained, the roads were turned to mud. If you were invited to a meal at someone's house, you took a bath (assuming you had one) at home before you left, and then, when you arrived, your host's slave would come and wash your feet before dinner. At the last supper, a different order of events takes place; the room was borrowed, and by the time Jesus puts the towel around his waist supper had already been served.



Jesus doesn't get very far with the feet washing before someone objects. Characteristically, it is Simon Peter who protests the loudest. "You shall never wash my feet", he says. In reply Jesus tells him "Unless I wash you you can have no part in me." Peter replies: "Lord, not only my feet, but also my hands and my head". Peter's confusion is forgivable - after all, what Jesus is doing is truly shocking: a master acting like a slave. To top it all, Jesus then tells them to go and do likewise. This is one of those profound changes in the way we think about God, and in the way we relate to each other. Jesus says, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

The washing of feet illustrates the true nature of discipleship, and of friendship, which is one of humble service to each another. For it to work you need to have love - like the love of Mary anointing the feet of Jesus with her hair. Is it possible that Jesus got the idea from her? We will never know. Both demonstrate the saying that the most beautiful things, the most loving things in all the world cannot be properly expressed in words, but only in actions.