

Maundy Thursday

1 Corinthians 11.23-26 • John 13.1-17, 31b-35

6 April 2023

Christ Church, Chelsea

This solemn night we gather to remember what has been handed over.¹ The apostle Paul describes to the Christians in Corinth how Jesus, during his last evening with his disciples, took and broke bread, and proclaimed a new covenant marked by the cup of wine. He is evidently passing on a story treasured by the earliest Christians: the memory of Jesus' strange, unforgettable words and actions at the start of that long night in Jerusalem.

And there is a wordplay in Paul's writing that is often missed in the English translations. Paul says: 'I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread...'. But that Greek word we translate 'betrayed' is in fact the same word as Paul uses earlier in the same sentence to speak of what he has 'handed on' to the Corinthians. A more literal translation would be: 'I received from the Lord what I also *handed over* to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was *handed over* took bread...'. What Paul has in view may be the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. But it may just as much be the act of God in handing over Jesus to death for our sake. As Paul writes in the eighth chapter of Romans, 'He who did not withhold his own Son, but *handed him over* for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?' (Rom 8.32). What is Paul handing on to the Corinthians? The strange and mysterious story of Jesus' last supper

¹ This line, and one other in the second paragraph, come from Richard Hays's 2012 sermon for Maundy Thursday at King's College, Cambridge.

with his disciples, yes. But also the truth of God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

And there is more that is handed on today. At cathedrals across the world this morning, clergy renewed their ordination vows, recalling our prayer to live in ongoing obedience to Christ the great shepherd. And we here will in a moment pause as we re-enact the final great act of Jesus which John the evangelist has in his gospel. There is for John no last supper as in the other gospels. Rather, Jesus gets down on his knees and plays the role of the lowly servant. He washes the feet of his disciples.

This too we hand on today. And like Christ's sharing of bread and wine, this footwashing is not some mere signal of the good we are called to here and there – the occasional shift at the Foodbank, the moment of hospitality offered to the awkward neighbour. These things are good. But in eucharist and in the washing of feet – those acts of Christ which have been handed on to us, those acts which mark God's handing over of himself – we are being pointed to the shape of the whole life we are called to lead. For in following Christ we are, in some sense, handing over ourselves. We give over to God our ambitions, our hope, our trust, our doubt, our reluctance, our fears. We ask for God's grace to love one another, to live and work to God's praise and glory.

'As often', Paul says, 'as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.' Yes, we say. We proclaim the death of Christ. In the eucharist. In the washing of feet. In handing ourselves over to the grace of God. We hand on what we have received, that God's giving of himself may be remembered now and in all eternity.