

**Holy Thursday
March 20, 2008**

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We hear again tonight perhaps the most probing question of Jesus' whole life: do you understand what I have done for you? Remember the Pharisees and the man blind from birth. Some thought they did see; some thought they did understand. And they remained in their blindness and sin. Generations have tried to understand; millions have claimed to; few live as if they actually do.

Do you understand? My life? My teachings, my parables, my friendship, my love? Do you understand? Do you understand that for this I came into the world: to fashion a new royal priesthood of God, to remember Eucharist—the simple gesture of giving thanks to God for all you are and have been given. Eucharist: it remains an eternal promise of my presence with you. And I give you an example of how you must serve one another—not just by washing, but by bathing each other in tenderness and love?

This evening is an evening of extraordinary intimacy. It was then; it should be now. Palm Sunday was the day of the great crowds of admirers, the mobs of fickle friends and famously forgetful followers. Tonight is a stark contrast: tonight is for intimate friends and hand-picked confidants. Here at

table recline Peter and James and John. And over there Andrew and Matthew. And close by is another intimate friend and very trusted comrade, Judas Iscariot. And who knows who else might have been there and not made it into the official record? It would be strange to eat a last celebratory family meal without your mother, wouldn't it? Or maybe some of the other women who seemed so close to him, to his life and ministry. Who knows? (Or as someone said to me last week: there was no pizza take-out; someone had to cook and clean up!) But they were all friends and would-be lovers.

It was a small gathering of very close friends eating and drinking together as they had done so often in his company. It was nothing new for them; it was everything new for them. And he asks them too: do you understand what I have done for you? Does Peter? Does the beloved disciple? Did his mother? Did Judas? Do you understand? I think not. At least not yet!

We can too easily turn this evening into a tender, touching, but finally simply tepid celebration. We can too easily miss the awesome import on the occasion of that simple meal. On the evening of that last supper, the world was about to be turned on its head. Not just Jesus' personal world (his hopes, his dreams for Israel, his expectations of his God); all of that is about to be

tested, but, even more shattering, the *whole world* was about to be turned upside down. This night shapes the foundational paradox of our life as Christians. As Timothy Radcliffe puts it: this night “is a story which tells of the moment when there was no story to tell, when the future disappeared.” And “we gather as a community around the altar and remember the night that the community disintegrated....Our community looks back to when it fell apart.”

God was about to be abandoned and die in order to re-start creation from the beginning and in order to show again just how much God loves this world and all its desires and dreams.

Don't ask me to explain it. I can't. But don't forget that *is* what happened. It is not all about tenderness and pastel flowers. No matter what it looks and feels like, God is about to shatter even death itself. And there will be life in abundance forever. That is the promise Jesus must have struggled to keep in focus this night. That is the promise you and I remember this night. That is every Eucharist we celebrate together from this night on.

Do you understand what I have done for you? Answer slowly. Because someday soon you may be invited to live the answer you give.