

Chichester Cathedral Triduum 2019: Maundy Thursday

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.'



Many of you last year will have seen Peter Jackson's extraordinary film, *They Shall Not Grow Old*. This was remastered footage of the Great War and was undoubtedly some of the most striking material produced for the centenary of that war's end. It underlined, as many historians have done in recent years, that much of how we remember the First World War has been shaped by the memoirs of the late 1920s, where the trauma and horror predominates. What Jackson's film underlined was that, for those who fought, there was amidst the horror considerable camaraderie, a sense of purpose and commitment that many would miss once the war was over. During those four excruciating years, friendship accompanied horror, and great suffering became an opportunity for sacrificial love.

This is not to diminish the horror but, as historians are always keen to stress, how and what we remember is complex, highlighted vibrantly in the years immediately following war in the paintings of Stanley Spencer. Here, the horror finds its response with tenderness, love and domesticity and, like, where love and domesticity often seem freighted with crisis. Like his magisterial frescoes in the Sandham Memorial Chapel, we are invited into a world where violence does not have the final word and yet where love is

never cheap – invited, as we are in these three days, to know a salvation not procured for us through heroic might or the overthrow of empire but in costly love, of a life laid down for others.

Remembrance in the Bible is quite different from what we might mean by it today. It doesn't mean 'calling to mind'. When the Law in Exodus 12 commands the Israelites to observe the Passover as a 'memorial day' to be observed 'throughout your generations, as an ordinance forever' (Exod. 12.14,17), remembering here has a meaning that is present and active. When a Jewish family celebrates its Seder meal, it isn't remembering God's deliverance in the same way that we might remember the fallen in British wars with a two minutes' silence. Instead, the Jewish family will be inviting the same power of God to be active in their present.

When Jesus takes bread and wine and says 'do this is remembrance of me', similarly, he wasn't inviting us to make a memorial; we're not simply calling Jesus to mind, but inviting him to be actively present with power (Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 218) in the communion of the people.

Look at Spencer's portrayal of the Last Supper from 1920. On the one hand, it's a homely image, of friends gathered around a table, sharing food as if on a summer's evening. There's a sense of peace and safety: the disciples' weary feet look freshly washed by their Master and the tables, arranged as in a Benedictine refectory speak of stability; there is a longing in their faces that speak to us as we arrive *here*, tucked into this hallowed space amid ancient walls. And yet, a closer inspection reveals the crisis and tension lurks: The feet and toes that dominate don't seem to join up with the bodies very easily, which seem twisted, out of joint. The Beloved Disciple falls rather than rests on the Lord and Judas squirms away. A hand from nowhere rests open on the table between Judas and Jesus. Our eyes are drawn across the feet to the bread being broken which, at the painting's centre, is the focus for this tension amid the peace, and peace amid the tension.

For this Passover, this new deliverance from death and slavery, comes not from on high in a dramatic, miraculous act as in Egypt, but in the self-offering of the Son of God who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Note that Jesus doesn't give us a manifesto, a lecture or a text, but symbols in the bread and wine and the washing of feet. In the Sacrament, God gives himself for our food, inhabiting us in a way that our senses can only barely understand and yet, in this communication of love, a new peace will be found.

Before Jesus steps out into the night, to confront betrayal, agony, and death, he invites us to pause: as with these disciples, out of joint and ill at ease, he bids us stay here awhile and receive the power that comes from his humility – from the tender and intimate washing of feet, in the giving of his body and his blood: signs to us that ‘he had come from God and was going to God’ . But more than this, for us to say ‘Amen’ at the end of the eucharistic liturgy is to be drawn into this mystery: it is to be able to say that we, with God’s grace, will know *our* exodus by sharing in the self-offering of the Son; not only with our lips in the liturgy, but in lives given over to others in sacrificial love.

For Spencer painting his Memorial Chapel as much as for those soldiers whose voices are recorded in Jackson’s film, there are echoes of this mystery that is shot through all creation: that in all horror that Death and Sin present us with in this life, love has, does and will conquer for those who follow Christ on his royal path to Golgotha and to glory.

As we prepare to follow Jesus into the chaos and terror of the hours ahead, let us stop awhile and receive this ‘medicine of immortality’ that binds us one to another: a new Passover and a new family.

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