

The Year of St. Paul

The Easter Triduum with St. Paul

Homily for Holy Thursday 2009

Tonight's second reading is the earliest account that we have of the Last Supper, written some years before the gospels in about the year 56 or 57. St Paul is describing an event that he was not present at, but he knows exactly what happened. At some time or another he was privileged to have a personal revelation of Jesus Christ. He says in this reading that what he is retelling was 'received from the Lord', and elsewhere he writes to the Galatians that the gospel he preached was not a human message: "it was not from any human being that I received it, and I was not taught it, but it came to me through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1.12). So Paul's description of the Last Supper comes on the highest authority of all. He has already taught the Corinthians about this but he is reminding them about it because their meetings for worship have become a cause for scandal. When they meet for mass they also eat a meal together, but this meal has degenerated into a reinforcement of social divisions. Some people have nothing to eat and go hungry, while others eat and drink to excess. How can they not see that it is hypocrisy to be so possessive and divisive over their ordinary food at the very same time as gathering to share the one bread and one cup of Jesus Christ? It is to try and shock them into seeing this that he retells the simple story of the Last Supper, the first Eucharist.

Within St. Paul's description of the Last Supper there are two brief sentences spoken by the Lord. The first, which is the one which interests me particularly tonight, consists of what he says as he holds bread in his hands: "This is my body, which is for you, do this as a memorial of me". This is my body; the bread which he holds, the bread which he gives them, the bread which he commands them to share for the rest of time, is no ordinary bread, it is his body. It is not a symbol, it is not a reminder, it is not a sign: it is his body. But it is more than that. He says "This is my body, which is for you". We must be careful not to skim too easily over the four little words 'which is for you'. There are two possible meanings of the words 'is for you'. They could be

purely describing possession: letters are distributed in an office; this one is for you Mr brown, this one is for you Mrs Smith, this one is for me and so on. The emphasis is on the 'you' - who does it belong to. But they could also have a rather more profound meaning. If we place the emphasis on 'is for' we discover a new meaning. The phrase is less about possession and more about purpose. The words 'is for' turn it into a phrase describing dedication. We are not talking about 'this letter is for you, this one is for me'; we are talking about the dedication of a book or a song perhaps 'to my wife, whose love makes my life worthwhile: this book, this song is for you'. In this sense the words do not imply possession. The song or the book does not literally belong to the writers wife, but they are dedicated to her.

So, when the Lord says "This is my body, which is for you" the essential meaning is that his body is offered to his hearers, and will be for the rest of time. When St Paul goes on to say "every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death" what he means is that every time we celebrate the Eucharist we re-enact and restate the 'for you'-ness of Christ. Christ's life and death were and remain 'for you', that is for us. This is made more obvious than ever tonight, when Christ kneels in front of his disciples and washes their feet. There is an intrinsic and unavoidable link between the Mass and life lived 'for you'. As we hear the Lord's words tonight, let us listen and take to heart his 'for you', because it is spoken directly to each of us. But let us do so acknowledging that this 'for you'-ness is also transferred to the life of every Christian. We who eat his body become his body, and so it is essential to the life of the church, and the life of every Christian, that it also becomes a life lived 'for you'.