

The Dinner Party in Bethany

When I was ordained in 1980, my liturgy professor and his wife gave me a book about dinner parties titled “The Supper of the Lamb”. Written by a priest, Robert Farrar Capon, it includes, along with recipes, some culinary and theological reflections. Some of these tie in well with the dinner party we just heard about in the gospel.

For example, Capon writes: “The dinner party is a true proclamation of the abundance of being – a rebuke to the thrifty little idolatries by which we lose sight of the lavish hand that made us... It was largesse that made us all; we were not created to fast forever. .. The dinner party is a sovereign remedy for the narrowness of our minds and the stinginess of our souls.”

(Isn't this the contrast we see in today's gospel: Mary's largesse, and Judas' stinginess of spirit?)

And in regard to preparing the table Capon writes: “Consider the smells at your table... Don't wax your furniture the day of the meal; anyone with a good nose will pick it up. Don't use room freshener either, unless the smell of the outside air is so bad that you have no choice; even then use only the mildest one you can find. Select flowers which have gentle and fresh scents, not overpowering ones. Finally, if at all possible, air your napkins before the meal and put them on the table as late as possible. There is no more delightful small touch than this, especially in the colder seasons when the house is closed up. To unfold a napkin and smell the marvellous odor of clean linen and fresh air is to know that one's hostess has thought of everything.”

(John too makes a point of describing that the house was filled with the fragrance of pure nard.)

Finally, Capon links the extravagance of love to the Passion: “It is so much easier not to get involved. But playing it safe is not Divine... Love is the widest, choicest door into the Passion. God saved the world not by sitting up in heaven and issuing antiseptic directives, but by becoming man, and vulnerable in Jesus. He died, not because he despised the earth, but because he loved it out of all proportion and sense.”

The dinner party John describes is filled with extravagance.

Lazarus, who had died and who Jesus had called forth from the tomb, is at the table. His sister Mary is overcome with love and gratitude and breaks open an extremely valuable bottle of pure nard. The Greek word translated ‘pure’ here, *pistikos*, is related to the word for faith, *pistos*. Mary, in faith, pours the oil over Jesus’ feet, and wipes the excess oil from his feet with her hair. Mary’s action goes way beyond customary propriety and comfort zones! But then, so did Jesus’ act of having the tombstone rolled away, and calling her brother back from the dead. Jesus graciously accepts Mary’s gift, and speaks of it as the preparation of his own body for burial. He names the elephant in the room.

This table of light and life and love is surrounded by darkness, that is seeking to overwhelm the light. We see the darkness in Judas’ harsh criticizing and negating of Mary’s loving action. And in the verses that immediately precede the dinner, we hear the Pharisees and chief priests planning to put Jesus to death because he raised Lazarus from death, and they are afraid of the consequences.

They issue orders that if anyone knows where Jesus is, they should report it, so they might seize him.

The very first thing that John says about the dinner party is that it takes place in Bethany six days before Passover. Bethany means “House of the little ones, house of the poor.” Passover is both a meal, and a festival of liberation, and it is the backdrop, the context for Jesus’ death and resurrection. In John’s gospel, Jesus is sacrificed on the day of preparation for Passover, as the Lamb of God. The gospel on this 5th Sunday of Lent is a clear reminder that we have now entered into Passiontide. Bethany is on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and the dinner party is the final event before Jesus enters Jerusalem.

At the dinner table we see both Lazarus, and Judas. It is Jesus’ raising of Lazarus leads directly to his own death, and it is Judas who will report to the religious authorities where they can find Jesus. In the midst of this encroaching darkness, Mary’s action is an outpouring of gratitude and love.

We might picture Mary’s anointing of Jesus as the centre icon in a tryptich of three related icons. On the left is Lazarus, his hands and feet tied with bands of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth, emerging from the tomb towards Jesus, who, after giving thanks (eucharist) calls Lazareth forth in a loud voice.

In the centre is Mary, anointing Jesus feet as he sits at table with his disciples, wiping his feet with her hair: a sign of Jesus’ body being embalmed, prepared with spices for burial.

And on the right is the icon of what happens next with feet in John's gospel. The night before his crucifixion, Jesus rises from the table (the same word 'rises' used to describe the resurrection), and he lays down his outer garment (the same word used to speak of laying down his life). He wraps a towel around himself, pours water into a basin, and washes his disciples' feet, wiping them with the towel, just as Mary had anointed and wiped his feet. Here too, Judas is the shadow, for John tells us that the one who splits wholeness apart has already put into the heart of Judas to hand Jesus over.

This last Sunday before Holy Week, we meditate on these three interconnected images and their meaning: Mary anointing and wiping Jesus' feet, Jesus washing our feet so that we might wash one another's feet as he has done, and Jesus raising us from death.

What might it look like for us as a church community, as disciples of Jesus, to pour out our hearts, lay down our lives, and be raised from death?

What comes to my mind are those folks who fix toilets here at the Cathedral again and again, and pick up overlooked syringes and safely dispose of them. I think of those who make beds, and meals, and clean up. I think of those who are peacemakers. I think of those who set up and put away the Thrift shop week after week, and help those coming in to find what they need. I think of the ones who make soup and freeze it, and the ones who give it out to those who are hungry. I think of those who speak kindly and respectfully to our neighbours on the street. We have it in us to be Bethany - a house of the poor, and to throw dinner parties.

I also find myself thinking about Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta, kneeling and anointing the feet of the destitute and dying. In the poor, she believed, we meet Jesus; not a reminder of, or a symbol of Jesus, but Jesus himself, face to face.

And I think about us, here, now, gathered at table for eucharist. It's not quite a dinner party, but it is "the Supper of the Lamb" – the feast of love and life.

At the entrance there is both a basin of water, and a flask of fragrant oil for anointing. Whenever you see these, remember: these are the sign of our baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection; the sign of our baptismal ministry to wash one another's feet, and anoint the Christ in our midst.

It was a meal that was the context for Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet, and for Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet. It is a meal, Eucharist, that is the context for our hearing the gospel this morning. For Mother Theresa, the Eucharist links the Christ who is present, hidden in the wounded and wretched of the earth, with the Christ who is present, hidden in the humble bread and wine of the sacrament. In the Eucharist we receive the extravagant gift that is God's life and love outpoured. When we serve the poor, we pour out our life and love to God.

Mother Teresa was reviving an ancient understanding of the church when she taught: "Christ wants to give us the chance to put our love for him in living action. He makes himself the hungry one, not only for bread, but for love. He makes himself the naked one, not only for a piece of cloth but for that understanding love, that dignity, human dignity. He makes himself the homeless one, not only for the piece of a small room, but for that deep sincere love for the other.

And this is the Eucharist. This is Jesus, the Living Bread, that he has come to break with you and me.”

When we break the bread in the season of Advent this is what we say:

“God of promise, you prepare a banquet for us in your kingdom.

Happy are those who are called to the supper of the lamb.”