

NOT ONCE UPON A TIME

Maundy Thursday Meditation

April 14, 2022

Maundy Thursday is named such because it was on this night Jesus said to His disciples, "*Mandatum novum do vobis.*" Actually, Jesus didn't speak in Latin, but that's the Latin for the Greek which translates into English as "*A new command I give you.*" Then He went on to say, "*Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*" "Maundy" is derived from the Latin "mandatum," as is the English word "mandate." The way the Jewish culture measured their days, the day begins at sundown. So Maundy Thursday evening is also the beginning of a very long day for our Lord and His disciples, because it's the beginning of Good Friday. The Last Supper, His agonizing prayer in Gethsemane, the betrayal, the arrest, the mockery of a trial, the crucifixion was all on the same day; again, with sundown tonight, Good Friday has begun.

On past Good Fridays, I've pointed out there is much that is paradoxical, even oxymoronic, about Good Friday. Good Friday is an unhappy celebration. Good Friday is the day when the Living Water says "I thirst." Good Friday is the day when the Bread of Life hungers. Good Friday is the day when the Resurrection and the Life dies. Good Friday is the day the Priest becomes the Sacrifice. Good Friday is the day the High King is executed like a low criminal. It does seem paradoxical that we call the day Jesus was crucified Good; it does seem oxymoronic to label a day marked by such sadness as a good day. Yet, despite its sadness, Good Friday IS truly good. Good Friday recalls for us the good-ness and wonder of God's love ... we see that salvation, wholeness, redemption comes through the grace of a good, loving Father Who was moved by the plight of His children, and we see that salvation, wholeness, redemption comes through the sorrow of repentant sinners. To be sure, the observance of Good Friday is not designed primarily to induce guilt. Although you and I may have a lot of guilt to deal with ... and dealing with guilt can be a very redemptive thing ... we gather on Good Friday not to wallow in guilt, but to announce that guilt and sin have been addressed, atoned for, conquered, healed, dealt with once and for all. This is not some mythical or allegorical event that happened **once upon a time**; this was a supremely good and gracious event that happened **once for all time**.

As we read the Passion narratives, we realize Jesus would rather not have died on Good Friday: He was not a self-styled martyr. That much was made clear in the Garden as He prayed, "*Remove this cup from me.*" In your bulletin insert is a poem entitled "Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis", ("*Savior of the World: The Way of the Cross*" reproduced on the back of this manuscript), in which the poet writes about what she perceived as Jesus' momentary desire to step back. I won't read it now; I invite you to read this as a devotional either later tonight or tomorrow morning before we re-gather to worship. The poet is trying to imagine how Jesus would look when faced with the agony of this excruciating uncertainty. Referring to the humanizing portraits of Rembrandt, she notes how even the greatest painters never show Christ's face "in extremis," grimaced, with His teeth clenched.

It was clear to Jesus there was an absolute necessity for His death: Not even God Incarnate could manipulate or wish away the necessity of this; in fact, this is why He came; in the words of the poet, this is what he had entered time and flesh to enact. As finite beings we'll never fully understand the infinite mind of God this side of heaven, but we are told enough to know that this was the only way to secure our redemption. According to Mark's gospel (*Mark 14:32-42 read earlier*), Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "*Father, everything is possible for You. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what You will.*" Tonight we remember God denied His Son's request in the Garden, because there **was** no other way to secure the salvation of His people; so Jesus accepted it, and went on to suffer the consequences of our sin.

The sad commemoration of Good Friday, this unhappy celebration, serves to remind us that there is One Who is Good ... one Who is good enough to save us, One Who is good enough to cover us with His goodness, the only One Who is good enough to make us good in the sight of a good and gracious God.

And that He chose to do so is indeed *good* cause for celebration.

SALVATOR MUNDI: VIA CRUCIS

(A Poem for Good Friday)

By Denise Levertov

Maybe He looked indeed
much as Rembrandt envisioned Him
in those small heads that seem in fact
portraits of more than a model.
A dark, still young, very intelligent face,
A soul-mirror gaze of deep understanding, unjudging.
That face, in extremis, would have clenched its teeth
In a grimace not shown in even the great crucifixions.
The burden of humanness (I begin to see) exacted from Him
That He taste also the humiliation of dread,
cold sweat of wanting to let the whole thing go,
like any mortal hero out of his depth,
like anyone who has taken herself back.
The painters, even the greatest, don't show how,
in the midnight Garden,
or staggering uphill under the weight of the Cross,
He went through with even the human longing
to simply cease, to not be.
Not torture of body,
not the hideous betrayals humans commit
nor the faithless weakness of friends, and surely
not the anticipation of death (not then, in agony's grip)
was Incarnation's heaviest weight,
but this sickened desire to renege,
to step back from what He, Who was God,
had promised Himself, and had entered
time and flesh to enact.
Sublime acceptance, to be absolute, had to have welled
up from those depths where purpose
Drifted for mortal moments.