

AN OPPORTUNE TIME

This is the night we celebrate our Lord's Last Supper with His disciples. To do that, we need to have our minds free to be with Him, and not struggling with the details. So before we go to this communion meal, let me remind you of the setting.

The timing is like this: The Jewish nation, to which Jesus belongs, is getting ready to celebrate Passover, their most important commemoration. It is the heart of their remembrance of how God had delivered them, under the leadership of Moses, from bondage in Egypt some thirteen to fifteen hundred years before Jesus was born. It had established the Covenant between God and Israel on Mount Sinai, which was the most important thing of all. Jesus loved this festival at least as much as we love Christmas or Easter.

The Last Supper occurs the evening before the Passover Feast. Passover will begin Friday evening when the sun goes down, the beginning of the Sabbath. So Jesus shares the Last Supper with His disciples the night before, on Thursday evening, when He tells them He longs to eat the Passover meal with them again but will not get the chance until they can all do so in the Kingdom of Heaven. (Luke 22:16) He will be dead by this time tomorrow night. He will not live to see this Passover.

Maundy Thursday is loaded and laden with the immediacy of Jesus' approaching death, which the disciples cannot quite fathom or face. I still identify with them. I both do and do not understand it. I have and have not faced it. I want to enjoy the meal, and nothing is more important than being with Jesus, but I cannot shake the foreboding and the realization that everything is going wrong. Love and sorrow mix and mingle, and they cloak this night with meanings and feelings beyond all utterance.

Maundy Thursday occurs on three levels all at the same time: political, relational, and personal. Jesus is in a political struggle with the leaders of the Jewish state – that is political. Jesus is having a banquet with His closest and dearest friends – that is relational. Jesus is experiencing the hardest and most crucial day of His life on earth at the inward level of His own faith: who He is, what His truth is, and what His life is for and about – that is personal.

ON THE POLITICAL LEVEL, Jesus has taken Jerusalem by storm. Since Palm Sunday, He has been teaching in the temple all day, every day, with huge crowds in approving attendance. According to the Gospels, many lawyers and doctors of the Law step forward to see if they can discredit Jesus before the people. None succeed. The Jewish temple police cannot try to arrest Jesus in broad daylight because they would be mobbed by His followers. So they cannot arrest Jesus in the daytime, and they do not know where to find Him at night. That is part of Jesus' strategy. There are no streetlights or flashlights, and a lamp or a candle does not throw very much light. Jesus will be staying with friends at Bethany, a mile and a half up the ridge from the temple. The Garden of Gethsemane is across the Kidron Valley on the way to Bethany.

The impact of Jesus' Message and ministry is, no doubt, appealing to many of the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for Passover. He is fresh and exciting, and His influence is starting to sweep far beyond the supporters who have gathered at His request. Remember, at this time in history, that political power and religious power are the same thing in Israel – there is no separation of church and state. The people in leadership do not dare let Jesus carry His popular movement into the High Holy Days of Passover week. In other words, they are not sure, but they fear He may have enough influence with the masses to actually take over the leadership of the nation. They also fear that if He does attempt it, whether He could win or not, the confrontation between His group and the establishment would very likely end in Roman intervention. If any disturbance even hints at a riot, Roman soldiers would be sent in to quell it. That is not a Roman threat; that is a promise. And where is the Roman garrison? Right there at the end of the temple courtyard. The Jewish leaders know that if Roman soldiers intervene at Passover time, the result would be an enormous bloodbath – just as Jesus Himself had warned on Palm Sunday. And indeed it happened, about thirty-seven years later; in 70 A.D., Rome so obliterated the Jewish nation that it did not exist politically in our world for almost nineteen hundred years – not until your lifetime. This is not fun and games going on. Jesus is playing for keeps in an extremely volatile time, and so are the Jewish leaders who oppose Him. Even though we do not side with them, we ought to have a good deal more compassion and understanding toward their dilemma.

The political situation is that the Jewish leaders *must* stop Jesus before Passover begins. He knows this better than they do. Jesus has been planning it for years. He knows He is the Rightful King (the Messiah), and He wants the nation to accept Him for what He is. But *because* of who He is, Jesus will not coerce or use physical force. The people must choose Him of their own free will. Of course, the political leaders do not know Jesus' convictions on such matters. They are genuinely afraid that at some prearranged signal, all His followers will pull weapons out from under their cloaks and attempt the usual sort of coup. As those in power begin to realize that Jesus is really serious – as they awaken to the pressure He is exerting in this already terribly dangerous time – they grow frightened, furious, and determined.

Jesus sits at the table this night knowing that the opposition will make a move. They have to. He has left them no choice. It is not by magic that He knows. By this time, His enemies probably have a whole string of plans set in motion to apprehend Him. The pressure on His friends and disciples has become enormous. Any one of them could crack, and Jesus knows it. Every relative, parent, sweetheart, and friend of anyone close to Jesus – especially the inner twelve – is being pressured to “Help us find him. Help us to save the nation. We only want to talk to him. He’s young and headstrong and doesn’t realize what terrible danger he’s putting us all in by stirring up the people this way. Please, just tell us where he goes after sundown. We just want to talk to him. We only want to reason with him. We know he is a wonderful teacher and has impressive gifts of healing, and he is doing lots of good. We will even make a contribution to your movement, just to show our good faith.” Right ... Have any of you ever been in a church fight, where everybody always plays fair and tells the truth?

And it is not magic when Jesus knows that Judas has succumbed. If somebody is truly close to you, can you not tell when they change? Does a wife not know when her husband takes a lover? Does a father not know when his child has disobeyed? Do we look into each other's faces and see and read nothing? We know unless we do not want to know, or unless we have not been paying attention. *Of course* we know. And in comparison to Jesus, our radar is bent and rusty. In any case, Judas Iscariot (Greek form of *Judah*), “the man from the city” (*keriotha* often used to mean Jerusalem), has more relatives and friends in the area than any of the others. Hence there is more pressure on Judas than on any of the others. Most of us have

“betrayed” or “denied” Jesus in one way or another, for far less cause, when friends or loved ones started putting pressure on us of one kind or another. It is not hard to understand poor Judas. When battle lines form and people start choosing up sides, and all sorts of unverifiable information fills the atmosphere until everything seems confusing, it is not hard to comprehend what happened to Judas. Betrayal is not his biggest mistake. Killing himself before Jesus can get back to him to forgive him – that is the real tragedy. That is the real betrayal because Jesus needs Judas to help carry the Message of a Gospel about love and forgiveness that is far deeper than betrayal.

It takes the Resurrected Jesus several years to find a replacement – somebody deeply imbedded in betrayal and murder who, once forgiven, can understand the true heights and depths of the Gospel. Jesus finally finds who He is looking for: some jerk from Tarsus on his way to Damascus to kill more Christians. That is the short version, but it will have to do for now.

ON THE RELATIONAL LEVEL, Jesus is saying goodbye. He wants to find ways to help His disciples remember and understand. It will be up to them now to carry on what He has started. He wants them to love and support each other. Otherwise, He knows they will have small chance of keeping the Message alive. On top of that, He loves them. So He prepares a banquet for them, and He gives them some things to remember and some instructions. He gives them “time-release” keys that will later reveal to them a far greater understanding of the power and extent of His love for them – and, inseparably, of God’s love for them. So it is a night of sayings and images: washing feet, body broken, blood poured out. We still only dimly reach toward the full mystery and significance of it all.

Even though we do not fully comprehend all of it at any one time, it is essential – imperative, really – that we hear and hold on to a couple of the larger truths that Jesus tells us at this meal. First, the cup – the wine: It is a NEW COVENANT sealed in His blood. We cannot stay with the Old Covenant, or we will lose the New Covenant. This will be the biggest and toughest issue we will face as we move into our New Life in Christ Jesus.

Second, Maundy Thursday is the transition between life with the physical “Jesus of Nazareth” and life with the Resurrected Jesus – the Holy Spirit. All of Jesus’ faithful followers will have to make this jump – this leap. So among all of the commands of Maundy Thursday,

the command to “remember Him” is paramount. What does Jesus tell us this meal, this Last Supper, this communion with Him is primarily for and about? *“Do this in remembrance of me.”*

I know people who hear this all of their lives and never really *hear* it. It is just filler, or some nice sentiment, or just the way the Gospel writers happened to word it. Only, one of the things we know about Jesus, if we *do* remember Him, is that He is seldom careless or thoughtless or semiconscious about the things He does and says. *We* often are, but He seldom is. *“Do this in remembrance of me.”*

This is not egotism. Jesus is telling His followers that they need to remember Him or they will not be able to make the transition – they will not be able to know and trust the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will be Jesus in His higher identity. But if they know the mind and heart of Jesus, they will know the mind and heart of the Holy Spirit. “Let me introduce you to a friend of mine. Actually, it is still ME.” Jesus makes this coming transition really clear in a number of places, and especially in the Gospel of John. It is fascinating that so many of us still miss it, even though this transition is the heart and core of our NEW WAY.

Why do some of us get into Disciple Bands and study the Gospel of Luke together? And go over it again and again? It is our primary source of information about Jesus. It is our way of remembering Him; of learning more and more about Him; of understanding more and more about what He taught us, what He cared about, how He thinks, how He decides things, and how He stayed so faithful to God. *“Do this in remembrance of me.”*

THE THIRD LEVEL IS PERSONAL. Jesus is up against His own moment of truth. Is He really willing – is He able – to go through with this? Does any of it really matter enough to make it worth such a price? Will anybody actually remember, or understand, or care enough ... that He should go through with this night? This night which is about to turn into a horrible and living nightmare? The world is crass, people are self-centered, everybody eventually dies, and lots of people are killed unjustly – so what good will ever come of His throwing His life away at thirty-three?

The Last Supper is inseparable from the agony in the Garden. There is no place in or around Jerusalem where Jesus can make it through this night. But there is one place He *can* go: North! Home. Galilee. RUN! If Jesus goes back to Galilee, nobody will come after

Him. In that act, He abdicates the throne. The pressure will be off. He can teach and preach and heal and tell parables to His heart's content for fifty years; the authorities might make disparaging remarks, but nobody will care enough to come after Him. He can fall in love, get married, raise a family – live a normal life. God help me but after all these years, when it comes to this night, *I still want Him to run*. Quick! Oh PLEASE! Before the temple police come! But that is the heart talking, and it does not *want* to understand.

Do you remember the story of Jesus in the wilderness, right after His baptism? Forty days led by the Spirit and tempted by the devil. And at the end of those days, when Jesus had not fallen for any of the temptations, the text says: “*When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*” (Luke 4:13)

All my life, I have wanted that to be a misprint, a mistake. Why can't that be one of the verses some careless scribe added in later? That is not how it is supposed to be. It is supposed to read: “Jesus, having proven Himself wise and valiant beyond all the devil's wiles and expectations, convinced the devil that He was unreachable and untouchable, *and the devil never bothered Him ever again.*” That is how it is supposed to read. That is what it is supposed to say. That is how we keep trying to pretend it is and will be for us.

“*The devil departed from him until an opportune time.*” That is the real truth. That is what we need to know for ourselves, after we have seen how it was for Jesus. If the devil would not leave even Jesus alone after pounding Him for forty days, do we have reason to suspect that our own temptations are over? We think we have been through a lot – that we know some of the ropes now – and so most of the worst tests are behind us. Am I the only one who likes to spin that kind of fable in my mind?

There have been many “opportune times” for Satan to tempt Jesus since those classic wilderness temptations. Many people and many circumstances tried to steer Him off His course. Sometimes it was His relatives, many times it was His supporters, and even sometimes it was His best friends. (“*Get thee behind me, Satan,*” He said to Peter, and there was no smile in it whatsoever.) But on this night comes the lollapalooza: A sane and sensible little temptation, a temptation to undo everything His life has been about. North. Go north. Run! It's simple: It's not worth it. Just leave. Quick. NOW! Before they get here ... before it's too late.

As we stare at His story in wonder and compassion, can we also learn for ourselves – learn what it will take to follow Him? There is only one way to prevent Satan from offering up the endless temptations and the ceaseless efforts to booby-trap our lives: Walk away from God’s plans and purposes so consistently that Satan is reasonably pleased with us. If we are no threat to him, if we are even on his side from time to time, Satan will pretty much leave us alone.

So what do we expect? What do we know with absolute certainty? Well, we know that if we walk with Jesus, we can keep walking *through* every temptation. But that is very different from thinking we can walk without any temptations. So the other thing we know with absolute certainty is that Satan is always waiting for an opportune time. And from time to time, a real beauty of an opportune time will come along. Sometimes we even help to set it up.

Satan will especially wait and watch for a time when we are feeling weak, tired, discouraged. He will wait for a time when we feel confused, deserted, abandoned. When we know we are weary, when we feel ineffective, when we know hope is at low ebb ... then comes the lollapalooza: The temptation to undercut the whole show – the temptation to ruin everything we have worked and lived for. Of course, it may not *seem* like a very big temptation at the time. Just a simple, “This isn’t working; let’s go north.” But it is still a clear change in direction, against all the prayers and efforts thus far.

That is how it is for Jesus on this night. RUN! Go north. Go home. The authorities will never bother Him again if He does that. It will be over. He will no longer be a threat and will no longer be worth their trouble. The crowds will look for Him tomorrow and will not find Him. They will be disappointed, but they will get over it. They do not understand any of it yet anyway. They will forget. Besides, if He stays, they will melt away when it comes to the real power play. Liking Him and thinking His mission and Message are appealing are one thing – facing Roman steel is quite another. Jesus knows all this.

So Jesus tries to pray. And the voice screams at Him: “This is stupid! This is useless! Get out of here! Leave – NOW! No good will come of this. You are not the only one who might get hurt. Nobody will understand. Nobody really cares. RUN!” Jesus has wrestled with this voice before, again and again, all through the years. Dear angel of logic and practical right – high angel of light: LUCIFER. And what a hummer he is on this night – this “opportune time.”

What an absolutely amazing thing for us to look up, to blink, and to find that Jesus is still there. This is the height of the human side of the story. This is Jesus' hardest moment – and finest hour. From here on, it will be out of His hands. The humans will take over on Good Friday, and God will take over on Easter. But this is Maundy Thursday – the Day of Command – and the epitome of the choices and temptations that confront Him. And we see the warrior soul – and the naked commitment – that Jesus brings to meet it. *“Not my will but thine be done.”*

So Judas comes, in his terrifying innocence, and Jesus is still there. Jesus' friends and family do not want Him to be there. The Jewish authorities do not want Him to be there. The Roman authorities do not want Him to be there. The disciples do not want Him to be there. And Jesus does not want to be there. *Nevertheless, not my will ... and not anybody else's will either.* That is what a lot of us keep missing about Jesus. He is not living to please other humans any more than He is living to please Himself. He lives to please God, and tells the rest of us to do that too. *Thy will be done.* So Jesus is still there, waiting, when they come to arrest Him.

This is the night. It is going on at all three levels at once: political, relational, personal. It all culminates here. And everything – the whole mission and ministry of Jesus – stands or falls from here. It is *Maundy Thursday*, from the word “mandate” – Day of Command – the day of the mandate: from God to Jesus ... from Jesus to the disciples ... from there to here ... from then to now ... and to us. Will we live for ourselves, or for Him? Will we stay with Him – see it all through with Him and for Him? Or will we run?