

ADDRESS**29 March 2018****Maundy Thursday**

Exodus 12. 1-4, 11-14	The Passover
Psalms 116.1-2, 11-18	The Lord hears us
1 Corinthians 11.23-26	Institution of the Lord's Supper
John 13.1-17, 31b-35	The washing of the feet

The Art Gallery of NSW is currently displaying six extraordinary French tapestries, created around the year 1500, which are seen as representing the senses. Each of the large and colourful and finely-worked tapestries features a beautiful lady in a garden with many flowers and four trees, representing the qualities of wisdom and purity and justice and fortitude. The beautiful lady is protected by a lion and a unicorn. The women in mediaeval tapestries were always beautiful, because beauty was seen as the incarnation of virtue -- which is a bit hard on any of us who weren't born beautiful.

The sixth tapestry is wider than the rest, and the scene is different – the lady stands in front of a pavilion with the cryptic inscription *My sole desire*. She is placing the last of her jewels in a casket, in a gesture of renunciation. So this tapestry is seen as representing the moral sense, the soul, the mind, the heart -- the sense which is far more important than the senses of smell and touch and taste and hearing and sight, the sense that should guide all our thoughts and actions, that should become our sole desire.

As I began to prepare for Easter, I began to see these tapestries as also carrying a message about Christ's passion – in his agony he was assailed by all five senses, he could smell the blood of those who had been executed before him in the place of a skull, he could feel the pain of the nails holding him to the cross, he could taste the bitter wine he was offered, he could hear the crowd mocking him, he could see his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing by, sharing his pain, but his sole desire was to fulfil his destiny, to obey the will of the Father, and to die, we believe, in our place.

Tonight's service commemorates the night he was betrayed, to face this cruel death. Our celebration has a double focus – we remember the Last Supper, when he gave us the Eucharist; and he also gave us the Great Commandment, *love one another as I have loved you*, and confirmed his love by giving us a lesson in humility, by washing his disciples' feet, which was the job of the household slaves.

At the Last Supper, the Synoptic gospels tell us, Jesus took a piece of bread, or a loaf of bread, and broke it and gave a piece to his disciples. John tells us that, for Judas, it was a signal that

now was the time to fulfil his role in the drama of salvation, to go out into the night and betray his Lord.

The latest figures show that, in Australia, we are each eating less bread than we did five years ago and more of other, richer, foods. Many of us show signs of this, in the size of our waistline. In more austere Biblical times, bread was literally the staff of life, as the prophet Ezekiel called it -- the supporter of life, the sustainer of life -- the Hebrew word *lechem* or bread could mean any kind of food, for animals as well as for humans -- all that was needed to sustain life.

Even during their 40 years on the move, in the desert, the Israelites would have been able to make their ovens of dirt and sand and straw to bake their daily bread, from the manna which God provided, or from whatever grain was available. Grinding the grain and baking the bread would have taken each family two or three hours each day and, as the Gospel reminds us, grinding the grain was a two-woman job -- one woman would pour the grain into the opening between the two millstones, and the other woman would turn the wooden handle set into the upper millstone. Matthew records Jesus' saying that, at the end of the age, one woman would be taken and the other left. (Matthew 24.41)

Once in the Promised Land, the people could have more permanent ovens, but grinding the grain and baking the bread still took up a large part of each day. There were no Bakers' Delights in ancient Palestine.

So, in speaking of bread as his body, Jesus is telling us that he is our *lechem*, he sustains our life, our eternal life, through the sacrifice of his body on the Cross. To people who have not committed their life to Christ, this makes no sense, but to people of faith, to those who make God their sole desire, or even their main desire, Jesus is the greatest of all the gifts which God in his love has given to us, generation after generation.

This is the point of the Passover song we sang a few verses of tonight. It's a song which observant Jews have been singing for more than 1 200 years -- our extravagant God has given us so much that is good. The song actually has 15 stanzas -- five recall the Jews' rescue from slavery, and five recall God's saving miracles, and five are about living as God's people.

In our own time, Christians who honour the Jews as the first chosen people of God have added extra stanzas, to recall our rescue from sin and death, and the miracles of Jesus, and our destiny as people redeemed by his death and resurrection. As the fathers of the church understood from the beginning, the Christian community has become the new Israel, the new people of God, a people not chosen by race, but by faith.

Jesus said, *I have set you an example – I, your Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.* We are not called to be ministered to– we ought to accept the help that other people offer us, in their love, but we must always remember that we are called to minister to others, to support others in their need.

As a human institution, the church can easily be caught up in paperwork and regulations and personal ambitions; it can use its time in managing survival and growth rather than in proclaiming the Gospel and in ministry. The Gospel does not command us to build churches and maintain them, to debate and pass ordinances, to set up boards and councils and committees, and govern through synods and bishops – it calls us to minister, to feed the hungry, to give the thirsty something to drink, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to care for the sick and to visit those in prison. Its structure should simply be to enable its mission.

There is a modern hymn in our hymn book which reflects this truth, it was written by an American Catholic sister who has spent her life trying to fulfil her servant ministry. She turned 90 last year, but is still serving. There are several versions of the hymn on Youtube. The words of Jesus become our rule of life:

I am the bread of life, those who come to me shall not hunger, those who believe in me shall not thirst ... (TIS 535)

The bread and wine of the Eucharist are reminders that we are called to become the bread of life for others, to follow his example by being ready to do even the most menial tasks in love for others. In most churches there are always more people willing to take up the offering than there are to clean the toilets.

*Lord, help us to glorify you, by following your example, by loving and serving one another, as you have loved and served us. **AMEN.***