

Singing to the Lord in Exile: Biblical Reflections with Music

Reflection III: Singing Together in Christ

At Mass on Maundy Thursday, in some years I find myself surprised by the Church's choice of Gospel Reading. As sermons which follow that Gospel often remind us, in celebrating Jesus' words and actions at the Last Supper, Maundy Thursday commemorates the establishment of two Sacraments: the Eucharist and Holy Orders. Indeed, the liturgy takes the commemoration of the institution of the Eucharist so seriously that aside from the Chrism Mass, each church celebrates only a single Mass on Maundy Thursday so that the Mass of the Lord's Supper can properly symbolise the unique Passover meal which Jesus celebrated prior to His death.

Arriving at Mass this year, therefore, and having heard readings about the first Passover meal (Exodus 12) and St. Paul's account of the Institution of the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 11), one might next expect to read St. Matthew's account of the Last Supper (Matthew 26). Yet the Gospel for Maundy Thursday is taken from John 13, where we read of Christ's "Mandatum": His command to serve one another, graphically illustrated in the washing of His disciples' feet.

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (John 13:12-15)

The connections between the Eucharist and Christ's command to wash one another's feet (which as He later explains means to serve one another in humility) are in some ways obvious. In becoming a sacrifice for sin in His rejection and humiliation on the cross, God Incarnate engages in the most profound act of self-giving imaginable. In an extension of this act of service, Christ's sacrifice is offered to and for each of us at Mass. Having received Christ's gift, we are called to freely give ourselves to one another in acts of love. As St. Paul's letter to the Philippians puts it:

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death- even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:4-8)

Yet I think that we can perhaps see a further connection between the Eucharist and the Mandatum if we listen to Maurice Duruflé's famous motet "Ubi Caritas et Amor", which is often sung on Maundy Thursday during the Offertory.¹ The text reads as follows:

**Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.
Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor.
Exsulemus, et in ipso jucundemur.
Timeamus, et amemus Deum vivum.
Et ex corde diligamus nos sincero.**

**Where there is charity and love, God is there.
The love of Christ has gathered us into one.
Let us rejoice, and be glad in Him.
Let us fear and love the living Lord,
And love one another with a sincere heart.**

This motet might help us to understand another connection between the Eucharist and the Mandatum: that of God's presence, which unites us God's People. Whilst I will give a brief theological explanation of

¹ An excellent recording by the Leeds Cathedral choir is available on the Diocese of Leeds Year of the Word page from which you downloaded this reflection.

this theme shortly, I first want to note that as with other liturgical music which we've encountered, "Ubi Caritas" helps us to see what unity in Christ means in a way which words may struggle to express by themselves. In this motet, the unity of Christ's Body is here expressed by the beautiful harmonisation of a simple Gregorian chant. Unlike some of the polyphonic pieces which I've mentioned in previous reflections, the integrity of Christians is captured by the shared rhythm of the voice parts, with the exception of a single voice which gives life and movement to the phrases (this is particularly evident at the end of the piece). The unity with which Jesus gather His flock isn't a static unity, but rather a unity animated by loving action inspired by the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Having listened to this echo of God's presence, we can return to the Gospel for Maundy Thursday. It is perhaps tempting to read this passage as a straightforward piece of ethical teaching. On this reading, Jesus primarily helps His disciples by teaching them a moral lesson by way of a prophetic sign: He shows them that they must show humble love for one another, serving one another even in ways which involve exposing themselves to physical or social discomfort. Yet whilst this reading contains elements of truth, it is not adequate to explain Jesus' actions here at a deeper level. We can see this by examining Jesus' response to Peter, who is initially unwilling to be washed by Christ:

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." (John 13:8)

Notice that here, Jesus does not tell Peter that he must serve others in order to have a "share" with Christ. In some ways, this is surprising because John elsewhere makes it clear that unity with Christ depends on following His commandment of love (see John 15:10; 1 John 2:4-5). Rather, Peter needs to allow Jesus to wash him; to serve him. The mention of washing here may well be an allusion to the Sacrament of Baptism, in which we are united with Christ's death (see Romans 6:3). In a similar way, John's Gospel presents the Eucharist as indispensable for union with Christ's death (see John 6:53). In any case, the point is clear: unless one somehow accepts and is joined to Christ's sacrifice, one cannot enjoy a "share" in His inheritance of glory (see Romans 8:17).

But what does it mean to have a "share" (the Greek "*meros*" literally means a "part") with Christ? To understand the richness of this concept, it might help to jump ahead in John's text, to a section the prayer which Jesus offers at the end of the Last Supper. In John 17, Jesus prays for the unity of his followers, asking that:

They may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:21)

In other words, to have a "share" with Christ isn't just to be united to Him by copying his moral example, or even by receiving the promise of eternal life. When we are united to Christ through the Sacraments, we are in some mysterious sense really united to His life: it is almost as if we become a single person with Him (see John 15:1-11; Gal 2:19-20).² Our unity with Christ and the Father mirrors the unity between the persons of the Trinity, who share in a single divine nature and life. We are also, therefore, intimately joined to one another as Christ's body (1 Corinthians 10:17). And it is important to set this teaching alongside the message of Duruflé's motet: we also maintain and extend our union with Christ when, empowered by Christ through the Spirit, we keep his commandment to love one another. As already mentioned, this is an important wider theme of St. John's theology. His First Epistle, for example, encourages us as follows:

Let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7)

² For recent discussion and attempt at explanation, see Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (OUP, 2019), Ch 4-5.

We might also recall that according to a passage from St. Matthew's Gospel (25:31-46), we will be judged on the basis of how we serve those who are in need. In other words, we can find Christ present in those who are in need.³

This is perhaps a message which we need to hear most of all now that we are unable to receive Christ sacramentally. Christ has not abandoned us: He is still present with us both in the movingly intimate care which is being shown to those suffering from coronavirus or its social consequences, and with those who are suffering or dying. Christ makes Himself available to each one of us, seeking to draw us into His story of divine love.

Whilst the modes of Christ's presence in the Eucharist and in His Church differ, we often see the connection between the two in the experience of the saints. St Teresa of Calcutta remarks:

'In Holy Communion we have Christ under the appearance of bread. In our work we find him under the appearance of flesh and blood. It is the same Christ.'

With this in mind, we can begin an answer to the question which I posed at the end of the last reflection: why is there any need for Christ's passion or for our own present alienation from Christ's sacramental presence? Where is Christ in this pandemic?

As I have already stressed, we should be humble about our ability to understand God's providential purpose in permitting evil and suffering given our cognitive limitations, which are thrown into stark relief by God's omniscience. In venturing to answer this question, it is further important not to trivialise the immense suffering of Christ on the cross, or by extension all those who suffer in so many ways from the present pandemic and innumerable other tragedies.

Yet we can also take some comfort from what Maundy Thursday teaches us about Christ's presence in actions of Christian love. One reason that we might recoil with horror from a crucifix or from newspaper depictions of the deaths of those who die in quarantine, separated from their families, is because such deaths seem to embody the depths of complete abandonment and loneliness. As the Psalmist laments to the Lord from a similar position:

You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me; my companions are in darkness. (Psalm 88:18)

Such horror is perfectly appropriate in the first instance. For several centuries after Jesus' death, even Christians confident in the salvific power of Christ's passion and resurrection did not depict the crucifixion itself.

But Maundy Thursday gives us hope that in such situations, God is not absent. Rather, the acts of kindness of carers and even the suffering of victims can unite people to Christ's perfect sacrifice, and through Christ to one another. This is not merely to say, with some Christian philosophers,⁴ that human moral good can come from suffering and that this explains God's permission of the latter; we might wonder if such goods can compensate for the depth of suffering that we witness. Rather, my tentative (though, hardly novel) suggestion here is that through Christ's union with those who live in love, God's light illumines even the darkest situations. This gives acts of charity a dignity which surpasses their natural value. In Christ, we really are "all in this together".

³ I set aside the question of whether those in need in this passage are only fellow Christians.

⁴ For a classic treatment, see Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God: 2nd Edition* (OUP, 2004), Ch.11.