

Sermon for 21 April 2011
Maundy Thursday, Year A

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Amen.

Over the years I have been asked by a number of people, both Christian and non-Christian, what precisely the "Maundy" in "Maundy Thursday" means, and I wonder if we don't use a more updated term because the real meaning has the potential to embarrass us. Let me explain...

Maundy comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, which means, as one might guess, "mandate" or "obligation". Two specific obligations are highlighted today: firstly, the obligation to be faithful in observing Holy Communion which was established this night so many centuries ago, and secondly, the obligation to love each other sacrificially as it is so powerfully symbolized in the washing of feet.

I said that we might be embarrassed by the meaning of Maundy Thursday, and that might be why we've retained this rather precious, old English title for the day rather than calling it something like "Obligation Thursday". The concept of obligation seems so foreign to our modern sensibilities. It seems to us modern people to be almost quaint; it's an imposition, we might say, that we grew out of generations ago. We are so taken with ideas like "self-determination" and "individual choice" that the very suggestion that we have obligations beyond those we determine for ourselves flies in the face of the our contemporary, individualist dogma.

If you don't believe me, consider how so many people approach religious life. We might ask ourselves "what do I get out of going to church?" or "do I feel inspired by the service?" as if that's the most important thing. Certainly, our theological edification and spiritual involvement

are terribly important secondary effects of participation in some kind of religious life, but at least it seems to me that those benefits are just that: secondary. Our primary task in church is to worship God as well as we can (particularly in that paramount expression of worship which is the Lord's Supper), and doing so is an obligation.

Likewise, our contemporary discourse about charity is beset by the modern obsession with benefit to self. I remember being in college, spending a great deal of time doing various kinds of charitable work through my alma mater's center for outreach and volunteerism. Too often, people were enticed to volunteer by promises of what they would get out of the experience- benefits which ranged from how attractive such experience would look to potential employers or graduate admissions boards to the seemingly less mercenary incentives of "receiving more in terms of emotional satisfaction than one can give in terms of effort"

or of "learning about oneself and one's priorities in the light of those suffering from homelessness or hunger or whatever." I was, I am sure, no less motivated by such self-interest than were my classmates.

Again, though, it seems to me that the warm feeling we get after showing humble loving-kindness to a brother or sister—of metaphorically washing his or her feet—is a *secondary* benefit. We love our neighbor, which doesn't mean that we're fond of him but that we treat him as a beloved child of God, that we sacrifice our interests for his, and this is our holy obligation.

"I give you a new *commandment*," Christ says, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." He does not say "love one another when it is convenient" or "love one another as long as it doesn't interfere with your own agenda" but he calls it a "commandment" and says, "love one another *just as I*

have loved you." That "just as", by the way, is the Greek word καθως which doesn't mean "because" but rather "in the same manner". And so, we are to love each other "in the same manner" as Christ loves us, and (as we will no doubt be reminded tomorrow) that is to say that we are to lay down our lives for each other. This is true whether or not we have warm feelings after we sacrifice our good for another's. This is a commandment, our obligation.

If you'll forgive me for reminiscing, I'll never forget a series of class sessions we did in my parish's youth group when I was a teenager. Our teacher wanted to do a course on other religions and other expressions of Christianity, so we visited the local mosque in Fort Smith and the synagogue and the Buddhist temple, and we had one of the Sisters of Mercy come and speak with us and even a Salvation Army clergyman. On a number of occasions, one young man in the group would say admiringly about the religion du jour something

like "they seem to take their religion so seriously; they follow these rules *just because they're supposed to.*" I was confused at first, and then I was saddened after I realized what was at the heart of his interfaith admiration. The Muslim prays five times a day and gives alms during Ramadan because he's supposed to. The Jew follows the Mosaic Law and practices *hesed* (that is "loving-kindness") because he's supposed to. The young man's implication was that if we (teenage Episcopalians, I guess) went to church or practiced loving our neighbor or refrained from sin, it wasn't just because we were "supposed to", but because we were getting something out of it.

Of course, we were all churchgoing young people and most of us (myself included) weren't forced by our parents to go to youth at St Bartholomew's on a Tuesday night, so we probably were "getting something out of it" and that's great. But what if we went through a period in our lives when we

stopped "getting something out of it", or at least stopped "getting something discernible out of it"? I suppose that if my young friend's assumption were correct, we'd stop practicing Christianity.

But then, at least for most of us, a nascent sense of obligation finally arose. We might have preferred (especially in our college days) to have slept in on a Sunday morning. We might have preferred (also especially in our college days) to spend that extra ten bucks on cheap beer rather than the fellow on the street needing some food or to spend Spring Break in Cancun rather than on a mission trip. But, (you know what?) we finally realized that our status as disciples of this Jesus fellow (that status given us in baptism whether we knew it or not) came along with some obligations.

We will, at the Easter Vigil (just as we do every year) rehearse that list of obligations again; we will again remind ourselves to renounce evil, to believe in God, to remain steadfast in the

church's common life, and to reach out to those who need our love.

For now, though, let me leave you with a recommendation. Try to forget, at least for a little while, that axiom which we tell ourselves and others so much: "Don't do such-and-such because you have to; do it because you want to." Try for a little while to sacrifice your time or treasure for another just because you're supposed to. Try to take time out of your day to pray for no other reason than that it is your obligation. Try divorcing for just a bit your spiritual practice from an assessment of how you're benefiting from it. The benefits will, of course, remain, but you might just realize that they're icing on the cake, as it were, that there is something to that old, starchy, stink-in-the-mud preoccupation with obligation after all.

We do good, not because we want to, but because we owe it to God, and then our desire to do good

will grow stronger in us, the obligation won't be so onerous and we'll probably forget we did it out of obligation to begin with. But beginning the process by asking what it is we owe God, what we are obliged to do, will grant us strength to keep on doing it during those periods when the benefits seem to have ceased, to remain steadfast in prayer when our prayer seems to avail little, to continue sacrificing ourselves for others when we find it harder to get that warm fuzzy feeling. Just like our beloved patron St. Paul, we must continue to run the race with endurance, knowing that our goal is ever before us and the risen Lord himself beckons us toward it.

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Amen.