

This Bread and This Cup
Luke 22. 1-22
Rev. Dr. Bill Crawford
A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church
April 3, 2011

Last week in our Youth Sunday worship the disciple Peter's denial was dramatically presented by the youth among us. The denial was predicted, foretold, by Jesus at the Last Supper. That supper is before us this Lord's Day, in the scripture (both in the Gospel and then the Epistle to the Corinthians – an instruction to the early church - as read by Clark).

There is much feeling at the table with Jesus and the disciples at the Passover in that last week. The words by which he blesses – those words of institution: “This is my body, broken for you.” And “this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” . . . Those words are an invocation and blessing upon the sacred meal, the sacrament of our faith.

The very next words of Jesus are so very much different, as we read in the passage. They are hardly sacramental. He announces that “there is one here who will betray me.” Imagine, the feeling – right there at the table!

Leonardo DaVinci's great painting of the Last Supper attempts to capture that very moment when the disciples are initially in confusion upon hearing Jesus' words about the betrayal to come.

It must be numbing for the disciples to first hear such a thing . . .

The great artist, DaVinci, holds that moment in which the disciples look almost beatifically solemn or solemnly beatific in contrast to what I think their expressions must be upon the disarray that will come, only moments away. . . (By the way, representations and reflections on the Last Supper can be seen at today's spirituality center.) . . .

Then, Luke's Gospel, reports – that, right there at the table – “a dispute arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.” To which Jesus responds that the greatest will be the one who serves. With this, Luke's Gospel shows that the disciples have no understanding of who Jesus is as the suffering servant, who would be lifted up as the Messiah. The One who would be raised high, stoops low to serve.

And then – right there at the table – as there are murmurs and expressions of shock, as you can imagine in response to all this – Jesus speaks these words, to Peter: He says: “Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat. . . . But I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and [that] you, when once you have turned your back, strengthen one another.”

Peter is so very quick to speak up – at least *then* he is -- to espouse his allegiance and loyalty: He boldly proclaims: “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and even to death.”

Imagine Jesus - all knowing Jesus - hearing this. Imagine, what the others at the table are thinking (not knowing what Jesus knows) – What’s this that Peter is saying? Could *we* ever make a commitment like that? And, what is it that is at risk? What is Jesus subject to, anyway?

And in response to Peter’s proclamation of unfailing loyalty, Jesus says. “Peter, this day [this very day] you will have denied me three times – before the cock crows (Mind you, as this is happening, it’s still early. It’s in the darkness before dawn. And the cock crows at daybreak.) . . . So, Jesus is saying that Peter will deny him . . . three times! And that this will happen . . . before the sun even rises.). Jesus says this right there at the table, where the bread has *just* been broken, and the cup has *just* been poured.

I mentioned the DaVinci painting of the Last Supper: It is one of the most reproduced images in history; yet its intention was merely to make present the elements of the Eucharist to a small community of Dominican monks in Milan. Meanwhile, artists over the years have sought to do the same by presenting this meal in terms of their own context and culture.

One of them is the painting of Margaret Ackland – which you can see here today in the Spirituality Center.

In Ackland’s painting of this scene, we do not see any arrangement of holy apostles – albeit posed on one side of the table as DaVinci pictured them (I was always wondered about that.) -- but, rather, it’s a chaotic crowd caught in the drama of the moment. It is evening and people lean forward into the candlelight that illumines the shadowy upper room where they are gathered – around the table. Men, women and children gather to listen to the words of Jesus.

Imagine, right there at the table, their faces, expressing a range of feelings – from of peacefulness to deep anxiety.

There are faces of men, young and old, and also a considerable number of women and children. This painting reminds us that women and children are hardly ever portrayed in images of the Last Supper. Yet it’s entirely consistent with what we know about Jesus who welcomed women among his disciples and frequently engaged and blessed children.¹

Imagine . . .that’s us. Right there at the table. All of us. It is not a place of privilege and exclusion; it celebrates God’s generous and inclusive love.

¹ Comments by Ron Pattenden, Art Way Visual Meditation, September 19, 2010.

“For God so loved the whole world, that he gave his only son.” This body . . . broken for you. This love poured out.”

There at the table, in all our humanity, we are there – with our confusion and denial, in our devotion and in our disbelief, in faithfulness and faithless, with all that it is about us, Christ comes to us with love poured out, that we may be restored, fed, sustained . . . that we should not perish – not deadened by our denials and the limits of our ways . . . But have life, now and always.

Amen.