

Cross Examination – Maundy Thursday 2016

"Lord, Is It I?"

Text: Matthew 26:21-28

*What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest Friend,
For this Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end?
Oh, make me Thine forever! And should I fainting be
Lord, let me never, never, outlive my love for Thee. Amen. (TLH #172)*

Grace and peace be yours as you hear once again the reading of Jesus' last will and testament, and rejoice in the inheritance given to you on the night before He died. Amen.

Our theme for our midweek services this Lenten Season has been "*Cross Examination*." We are basing our meditations on questions asked by or of Jesus during Holy Week. This evening we examine our own hearts on the basis of a question spoken by Jesus' disciples in the upper room: "*Lord, is it I?*" Our text for this evening gives both the setting at which this question was posed and the question itself, together with the account of the events that form the basis of our celebration this evening - Maundy Thursday. These words are found recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, the 26th Chapter:

ESV **Matthew 26:21-28** *And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." ²² And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" ²³ He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. ²⁴ The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." ²⁵ Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so." ²⁶ ¶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*

So far the verbally inspired words of our Holy God. That we might be reminded of the perfect and holy character of these words, so also we pray, "**Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth.**" Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians, Joint-Heirs of the bequest given by Christ to the Church on this night:

During our mid-week Lenten services this year we have been using questions, asked long ago, to give us insights into our hearts today. We have heard questions that expected no answer at all, questions that indicated true perplexity on the part of the one asking the question, and questions meant to teach rather than to learn. This evening we study still another kind of question. Here we find a question that indicates that a "no" answer is expected, but a question that also indicates a great deal of uncertainty on the part of the one asking.

The disciples asked this question of Jesus when he revealed to them (again) that one of them was going to betray him. We can obviously understand and appreciate their perplexity at this revelation from the Master. They had been together for about three years, and together they had experienced truly unique events – things never before seen. Now they learned that one of their intimate little band was about to carry out an act of utter treachery and ultimate disloyalty.

We can, again, imagine how this must have shocked the disciples, but credit where credit is due. The disciples get high marks in this entire episode for several reasons. First, they accept what Jesus says without question. The Lord said someone was going to betray him and therefore the only question was, "Who?" The disciples were learning to trust Jesus' word, to rely upon it with

complete confidence and to act accordingly. Second, their question itself indicates growth and a certain maturity on the part of the disciples. The original question (as we said earlier) indicates that those who asked it expected a “no” answer. In English we would put it this way: *“I’m not the one who is going to betray you, am I?”* And yet the disciples, though they were confident that the answer was no, still asked the question – and therein lies the evidence of their growth and maturity.

As the disciples were learning to trust Jesus, they were also learning *not* to trust themselves. They had seen the strongest among them fail, time after time, and they had grown very skeptical of their own ability to withstand temptation and to choose the right path with any consistency. So also they asked the One who alone could know such things: *“Not !! Is it Lord?”* In other words, *“I can’t imagine myself doing such a thing, but then again there is probably nothing of which I am not capable. Am I really going to do such a thing, Lord?”*

We need to develop this same healthy skepticism of ourselves and of our own spiritual strength and fidelity. Here is just one extremely disturbing example:

Several years ago, Deanna Laney (a home-school mom and active member of her Assembly of God church in Tyler, Texas) woke her two oldest boys – ages 6 and 8 – led them to the back yard and killed them. She also critically injured her 2-year-old son while he slept in his crib. The toddler survived, but will never lead a normal life. Mrs. Laney, who claims God told her to kill her children, was found not guilty by reason of insanity. Her husband, who slept through the ordeal, together with her extended family and friends were shocked by the events – understandably so.

The point is this: What do you think this woman would have thought or said had Jesus himself announced to the members of that woman’s church that one of its members was going to brutally murder his or her own children?

Am I suggesting that someone among us might do such a thing? Of course not. The point is that no one should presume to know the depths to which he or she is capable of sinking. God the Holy Spirit put it this way in 1 Corinthians 10:12, **“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”** The disciples are to be commended for the subtle self-skepticism demonstrated by their question. I wonder if we share their healthy brand of self-doubt.

Jesus, you will recall, prompted our question for this evening when he announced that one of the disciples was going to betray him. If Jesus were to suddenly appear among us today and make that same announcement, what would be *your* reaction? Perhaps you too have developed a healthy respect or fear of the power of sin and of your own profound weakness in the face of adversity. Maybe you too recognize just how strong your old Adam (your sinful flesh) can be. Think back for a moment to some terrible and embarrassing sin in your past. Before you fell into that sin, would you ever have imagined that you were capable of such a thing? Maybe, maybe not.

The bottom line here is that you and I simply cannot be trusted. Because of that sinful flesh that clings stubbornly to us we should recognize on a daily basis that the spiritual struggles that we face are beyond what we can handle without the power and strength of God in our lives.

Such an understanding is an indication of spiritual strength, not weakness, and it provides the background or setting for the event that we celebrate on this special evening. In fact our understanding of the events of Maundy Thursday is aided greatly by a full and complete understanding of the question asked by the disciples and the statement by Jesus that prompted it.

For all of its simplicity, the gift that our Lord Jesus gave us on this night (Holy Communion) remains perhaps the most misunderstood gift that Christ gave to his Church on earth – with the possible exception of the gospel itself. There are literally millions of Christians who believe, for example, that Holy Communion is something that we do for Jesus. They believe that on Maundy Thursday

the Lord gave us yet another commandment to keep, that of holding a memorial feast to remind the world and each other of Jesus and his passion. There are also millions of Christians who believe that Jesus is “re-crucified” in a “bloodless sacrifice” each time Holy Communion is celebrated. Countless others believe that by the act of communing we earn forgiveness for our sins, and still others that there is no spiritual benefit at all offered to those who commune. Millions commune thoughtlessly and carelessly to their own spiritual judgment - **“not discerning (recognizing or acknowledging) the Lord’s body”** – while countless others regard the Holy Supper as a good luck charm intended to ward off ill fortune, sickness, and disaster.

While all of these misconceptions concerning the Lord’s Supper are false and damaging, there is another on which we focus this evening: the idea that Holy Communion was and is intended only for the strong, never for the weak. Or that the sacrament was intended only for those who have not fallen into grievous or frequent sin. While every error concerning the Lord’s Supper is dangerous in the extreme, this last misconception often prevents the divine gift from benefiting the very souls for which it was given. In this sense, the misconception of the weak and humble is the most tragic of all.

Remember the question asked by the disciples (**“It is not I, is it Lord?”**) and how the question itself gave evidence of self-doubt and weakness? Yet were not these same disciples the very souls to whom the Last Supper was given? Peter was about to publicly deny his Lord, and the Lord knew it. Yet Holy Communion was for Peter. All of the disciples were about to abandon Jesus in his most dire hour, and Jesus knew it, yet Communion was for them. They were weak and desperately needed the strength offered in this sacrament, and the Lord graciously provided it.

Does this mean that sinners who feel no sorrow for their sins should approach the Lord’s Table? Of course not. Jesus condemned all such when he said, **“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”** (Matthew 9:12) There is great sarcasm in these words from Jesus, for those who feel no need of forgiveness or a Savior are *terminally* ill – the sickest of all. They reject Jesus because they see no sin in their lives, no need for a savior or forgiveness. Did Jesus commune Judas? We are not told. Surely Judas needed the strength offered there in the Upper Room, yet Jesus had the ability to read hearts and, knowing his heart, could well have arranged for Judas to leave the Upper Room before Holy Communion was instituted.

The fact remains unchanged: the Lord’s Supper was and is intended as a merciful gift of comfort and assurance for troubled, burdened souls. It is Jesus’ parting gift to his Church on earth – a gift that would keep on giving until the last of the elect in the Church Militant on earth is transferred to the Church Triumphant in heaven. In Holy Communion we receive his very body and blood in a heavenly, miraculous union with the common elements of bread and wine. So simple, and yet so powerful. So straightforward, and yet so mysterious and wonderful.

Understand then, finally, that the strength and power offered here are in no way logical or rational. No scientist or philosopher will ever be able to quantify or explain this divine gift. Like so many things that are truly spiritual, this gift far transcends human logic or explanation. Here you experience divine, inexplicable power – strength, comfort, and peace promised by a loving, merciful God to his weak and suffering children. Here you come in contact, in a very personal, individual way, with the Savior of all mankind. You meet with him here, commune with him - in the way and in the place where he promised to meet with and strengthen you. Just as this is no place to approach thoughtlessly or carelessly, or with a cold and indifferent heart, so also this is no place to avoid when you are weak and burdened. Here you hear the Savior pronounce to you, in a very personal way, that the very body and blood you are receiving have indeed paid the full penalty for all your sins. In The Lord’s Supper we hear God’s precious decree: You are forgiven! Amen.