

Seen, Known, and Loved: The New Commandment
Maundy Thursday, Year A
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John 13.1-17, 31b-35

Homiletical traditions vary in Anglican parishes when it comes to Holy Week. Some clergy don't preach at all, believing that the liturgy speaks for itself. I have no rebuttal to such an assertion, though you may intuit that my own approach differs.

I was surprised when I arrived at St. Thomas's to discover that different preachers were scheduled for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil. This is one of the luxuries, I suppose, of having multiple clergy on staff and serving as official or unofficial honorary assistants—one can spread out the work in what is, especially in places like this, the single busiest week of the entire church year.

But I was formed in a tradition that held these three holy days, the Sacrum Triduum, to be one continuous liturgy, not three separate services, and that as one service, a single preacher underscored this point. In many other Anglo-Catholic parishes, the rector gets around this additional workload either by assigning an associate to preach or inviting an eminent visiting preacher. I have been both that associate and the rector who invites the guest preacher. But every once in a while, it falls to me to practise what I preach. So you are stuck with me for these three days.

I will, over the course of these days, expand upon what has become a familiar theme over the past several months: that of being seen, known, and loved by God, and of seeing, knowing, and loving others and ourselves as God does.

But first, let's try to see Jesus more clearly. Did Jesus have an ugly side? We know that he got angry at hypocrites, particularly those in positions of religious authority. (I say this as someone who is himself in a position of religious authority.) He drove the money-changers from the temple. Scandalously, at least to modern ears, he compared a gentile woman to a dog, though he also healed her daughter and recognized her dignity. He told people truths about themselves that they did not want to hear: for instance, he told Peter that he would deny him not once, not twice, but three times.

Jesus could be snarky. Jesus told jokes at other people's expense. He offended people. Jesus famously said, "Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me," and yet John's Gospel tells us that he became increasingly more offensive and less popular the closer he got to Jerusalem. So did Jesus have an ugly side?

Well, in order to have an ugly side, one has to have a dark side, or at least a "shadow side", to use a Jungian phrase. Now, I am one of those traditional Christians who contends that Jesus was and is both perfect man and perfect God, so I don't think he had a shadow side or a dark side. Whatever ugly side Jesus *did* have, therefore, was only ugly to us, not to God. Ugliness, after all, is often in the eye of the beholder, and only the Beholder of all things, God, sees what is really true and good and beautiful. So I believe Jesus was indeed beautiful inside and out, but often *not* in the way we human beings see it.

And because we don't see Jesus clearly, we can begin to see why Jesus was so hated. I think it's precisely because he *didn't* have an ugly side in the *fallen* and *sinful* sense of that word. Rather, the perfect union of his humanity and divinity resulted in a person who, metaphorically, held up a mirror to everyone around him. Those who denied that they themselves had an ugly side, or who had embraced the dark side, or who reacted and lashed out from their shadow side, looked into that perfect mirror, Jesus, and *saw what they did not want to see*. Some, when they looked, saw only the ugliness and the darkness, saw it for what it was, and hated it, and even worse: they hated the one who showed it to them. Others saw themselves, warts and all. And because deep down they truly *wanted* to see the truth about themselves, when the Light shone upon their darkness, rather than draw back into the shadows, they *bathed* in the Light. And I can also imagine that others at first drew back, fearing that the Light would burn them, but when they learned that the Light was not there to destroy them, they risked venturing out into the healing warmth of that Light.

Over two thousand years ago, the twelve disciples reacted, at various times, in all these ways. One infamously embraced the darkness and betrayed Jesus. One sadly could not stand the heat and denied Jesus. Nine others simply fled. Only one, John, stood in the light and bore witness to the end.

Thank God, Jesus did not only have these twelve men. I am thinking here of Mary Magdalene, who was once possessed by the darkness of evil, but healed by the Light of Christ. And we are told of other women who followed him and stood fast, even to the end, at the cross and at the tomb, some of whose names are lost to history but known to God. Above all, we always see Mary, the mother of Our Lord, for whom dwelling in the Light of her Son was the great grace she had been vouchsafed. She and the other women stood fast when all the men, save John alone, failed him.

While those women and John saw the true beauty of Jesus, we cannot say the same of Judas, or Peter, or those other nine. Later, I imagine that those nine who fled back to the Upper Room and locked it in fear, having deprived themselves of the Light, failed to see each other as Jesus had seen, known, and loved them just a few hours earlier. Confronting themselves and each other in that locked Upper Room, what did they think? What did they say? I can't imagine they comforted one another, but rather accused each other. They postured amongst themselves, saying defensive things, *self-protective* things, like, "Well, if you hadn't run, I wouldn't have, either." Or, "What else was I supposed to do?" And when the ordeal was over—or, perhaps in their eyes, had only just begun—and John returned with the grief-stricken Mary, what do you think their attitude to the Beloved Disciple was? Well, if *I* were one of those nine or even poor Peter, who had denied Jesus three times in John's very presence, I would feel ashamed, and resentful of John in his steadfastness. I would be angry at myself, angry at the other disciples, angry at Mary's grief, angry at Jesus for letting himself fall into his enemies' hands. I would tell myself that I had not abandoned Jesus in his hour of need, but that he had abandoned me!

Jesus, who washed my feet just so that I could get garden mud on them, who told me to love one another as he had loved me. What sort of a commandment is that?

Any of us who has loved someone else deeply—whether as a spouse, or friend, or companion, whether as a student or teacher, mentor or coach—if you stick with a person long enough, you will see that person’s ugly side. That’s the gospel truth. Everyone here knows that’s true. Everyone here has been pierced to the heart, wounded, by a loved one, just as *you* also have wounded someone *you* love.

And Jesus’ commandment on this Maundy Thursday is to love one another as he loves us. How is this even possible?

For my part, I have come to believe that following Jesus’ New Commandment is only possible when we remember that Jesus himself saw each of those twelve disciples for who they really were *as he was washing their feet*. He *knew* who would *betray* him. He *knew* who would *deny* him. He *knew* who would *abandon* him. And he knew who would stick by him. Were I Jesus, I might have gone out to dinner that night with John, my mother, and those steadfast women, instead, and left the others in the Upper Room to fend for themselves. (No Body and Blood for you!)

If I’m perfectly honest, I have to admit that one of the things I hate most about being a Christian is knowing what Christ did on Maundy Thursday. My own ugly side rebels against his perfect love. To *want* the grace to love you all, my family, my neighbours, and the world in just this same way is just too much to ask, isn’t it? I wish it were. At the same time, it’s important for us to remember that it isn’t possible for me, or you, or anyone in all creation to fulfill that New Commandment without the grace and help that can come *only* from the one who doesn’t have an ugly side of his own: Jesus.

My ugly side gets in my way all the time, and when I see the ugly side of others, my first instinct is to harden my heart. The whole of my life has, in fact, been one long lesson in learning how to hand over my hard heart to Jesus and ask for his heart in return. Only when my heart beats in time with the Sacred Heart of Jesus do I feel that I’m truly living the Christian life in its fullness.

And that’s what you’re invited into this Holy Week: to live the Christian life in its fullness. I’m sure most of you are probably doing just fine in maintaining a soft heart toward yourself, toward your family, toward the folks in the pews all around you, towards your neighbours, and towards other people of whatever political party or worldview whatsoever. Right? You’ve got no problem loving your ugly side or anyone else’s. Right?

Well, if your answer is in fact *yes*, as I’m sure it in fact is for some of you, then you’re in the right place. And if your answer is *maybe*, you’re still in the right place. And if your answer is *no*, you’re in *still* the right place. However hard or soft your heart may be, toward anyone whomsoever, there’s no better place to be than right *here* in Holy Week. Because *here* Jesus sees you, knows you, and loves you anyway, and knowing this, we can continue on the Way of the Cross, come what may.