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The Power of the Sign (Matthew 26: 14-46)

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This evening, we begin our journey into the heart of the paschal mystery. All week, we've been conscious of the crisis coming to a head, the fomenting of hostility, the agitation of the authorities and instability of the crowd. Judas has been looking for an opportunity to betray his teacher.

As the gospels tell the story, Jesus is attuned to what's befalling. He has discerned the heart of his betrayer; he knows his time 'is near'. And so he prepares to share one last meal with his disciples. Ironically, it's a Passover meal. On the night the Jewish people celebrated their liberation by God from slavery in Egypt, God's own Son is to be taken captive. On the night the Jewish people were formed as a people, the community of Jesus' followers will disintegrate and flee. And in the face of all this, Jesus takes bread, blesses it and gives it to them, saying 'This is my body, given for you'.

Dominican theologian Timothy Radcliffe has suggested that what's going on here is 'the clash of two sorts of power'.¹ On the one hand, is the power of the political and religious authorities, the power of brute force to capture, repress and kill. And on the other, is the power of the sign.² There is the dumb, material power of Pilate and his soldiers, and there is the power of imagination and symbol to make visible the truth and recreate the world. For what Jesus proclaims in this ritual meal is that everything he has lived and taught about God's generosity, God's self-sharing, God's faithfulness and refusal to retaliate, holds true even now. With this symbolic act, he is affirming that whatever horror human beings perpetrate, whatever brutality or cowardice seems to triumph, God's meaning – which is love – will not be extinguished or overwhelmed.

¹ Timothy Radcliffe, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* (London: Burns & Oates, 2005), p.16.

² Radcliffe, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?*, p.17.

At first glance, in the face of the forces bearing down on him, Jesus' decision to enact this sign (to spread a table in the face of his enemies, to evoke Psalm 23) seems of little use. Pathetic, futile. Yet as we can testify 2000 years later, through this sign Jesus not only proclaimed his vision of God; he created a way for his community to continue to live *from* that vision, to 'remember' who he is and who they are *in him* – the community of Christ. This sign was and is 'effective'. It helps to bring about, to make real, that of which it speaks. By the power of this sign, Jesus creates and recreates community, even as it is threatened with dissolution and dispersal. Through this sign, Jesus gives himself wholly to his disciples even as they are handing him over and running away.

It wasn't magic – it didn't override the threats and failings of the moment, but it worked to subvert the impact of all that was conspiring to contradict Jesus' life and its meaning. As Radcliffe writes, Jesus' sign 'was a creative and transforming act. He was to be handed over into the hands of his enemies ... to the brutal power of the Empire. He did not just passively accept this: he transformed it into a moment of grace. He made his betrayal into a moment of gift.'³ Every time we share this meal, we too are enacting our trust that God's meaning holds true. Every time we share this meal, we receive a gift that can embrace all loss, all failure, all evil and turn it to good – the gift of Christ's self-giving love.

But having said all this, tonight, we're present again to the vulnerability of this sign. We sense its fragility in the face of human violence and the business of the world. Always on Maundy Thursday, I feel as if we're back with those first disciples, about to enter the forcefield of the paschal event. Jesus asks us to stay with him, to remain true, to watch and pray. But the risk is great, our doubts about the point of it multiply; and we recoil. Jesus was tempted to recoil too. But still he gave himself away in bread and wine. As we prepare, then, to give ourselves to this paschal journey, let us humbly receive the gift of Christ's life in ours, a sign that God's love cannot be destroyed and will bear us to the other side.

³ Radcliffe, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?*, p.20.