



This is the “night he was handed over.”¹ The night the slow murder began. This is, to use John’s language, the “hour.” The night when hell itself breathed out, the night when our Lord was arrested, subjected to the power of sinful men, the night it all seemed to unravel, when everything Jesus had done was shattered. His followers fled. He was betrayed by one of them and denied by another. This is the night all the power of death, everything that is evil had full sway. The last night of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. This is a night that demands your attention.

A terrible night, yet we come to celebrate. We are dressed in white. We sing, once again, the *Gloria*. We act in a way that is at odds with the terrible events of this night. This is a night that should either be forgotten or at least given the somberness of Ash Wednesday, something other than a celebration like this. What is the meaning of this? Why are we doing this on such a terrible night? There is something uncomfortable here that needs some explaining.

In the face of betrayal and death, in the “hour,” Jesus said, “Take and eat; this is my body.”² “This...is the new covenant in my blood.”³ Kingdom talk: on the night before he died he talked about establishing a kingdom—not a kingdom like the kingdoms of the world. He rejected that at the beginning when Satan offered it.⁴ This is a kingdom where the greatest is the youngest, the weakest, the one who serves, not out of pride but self-giving, out of sacrifice. At this altar, on this terrible night, Jesus spoke of a different way, of a different kingdom, not a violent kingdom, but a peaceable one. And it is this kingdom that we enter when we eat his flesh and drink his blood in the Sacred Host and the Precious Blood—we enter into a new kingdom, at peace with God.

Together, when we are at table with the Lord, when we eat his flesh and blood, we are in a new world. We live in a new kingdom. We are citizens of God in Jesus Christ. Our horizon expands truly into the eternal when we enter this kingdom of his. For this we celebrate. It is truly the greatest gift we’ve ever received. It is right that we sing. It is right that we wear the white garments of the kingdom of light. Glory to God in the highest! We are his children!

Yet, there is still another kingdom. It is not insignificant that our Lord did this on the very night he was betrayed. This was not something he was putting off and only now was able to squeeze it in. This was the Passover, and he was the Lamb. “This is my body, which will be given for you.”⁵ Yes, he will indeed give his body. His words at table and his death on the cross are inseparable. Ushered into this new kingdom under the threat of death, there is still this world of sin. After communion tonight, you will see the church darken, the altar and sanctuary bare. All trace of our celebration will be erased and only coldness and darkness will remain. The slow murder will soon begin.

After our celebration, it will truly be dark. You will truly feel cold and abandoned. When Jesus left the table to go pray, it was truly dark. Evil was truly at work against him.

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:24

² Matthew 26:26

³ Luke 22:20

⁴ Luke 4: 5-8

⁵ Luke 22:19

When we go out into the world, we will see that it is still truly evil, truly violent and deceitful. There are murderers, liars, thieves. There is sick division among Christians. There are homeless people weary and without shelter very close to us. A wise old priest said once to his congregation, "If you think the passion of Jesus has ended, you have not walked the boundaries of our parish."⁶ We could say the same even about our parish, this beautiful place. They are there. We just do not see them. We do not look. Evil is still at work.

But we are citizens of a new kingdom, a peaceful kingdom where evil has no place, where we dwell in unity and charity, and all in love with God. We are Christians, born into and fed by Jesus Christ to the glory of God the Father. But where is this peace? Where is this unity in charity? This kingdom life?

Hear Paul's answer: our life is "hidden with Christ in God."⁷ At this table we are brought into the kingdom of God through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the instrument of God's reconciliation of the world to himself because he is the God who took upon himself our flesh, our materiality. And our Lord chose other instruments, bread and wine in fellowship which becomes his own true self. And it is through these instruments that we are ushered into a new kingdom, the peaceable kingdom of God.

However, even though the bread and the wine are truly changed into the body and blood of Christ, it still tastes like bread and wine. It still looks like bread and wine, but it is body and blood. Jesus spoke of kingdom on the night of his betrayal and death. We leave here, after feeding on the Lord of all, and walk into a murderous and evil world. Our life is hidden with Christ in God.

So what does this say of us? We are members of a kingdom where love and beauty are the same. Yet, we are in the midst of evil. What are we to do? What is the shape of our life?

If we are faithful, we will be peaceable. We will serve and love and not heed the sinful labels of a sinful world. Our weakest and poorest will be our dearest (God does take sides, and it is the side of the poor, the lonely, and the marginalized). We will continually witness to the kingdom that our Lord gave us on this night. We will share in the body and blood that he gave us. We will rejoice in that. But, we will also suffer the shame, the scandal, and the pain of the cross. We are called not to change the world that murdered our Lord. We are called to follow the Lamb who was slain, to be led silently to the slaughter, to lay our arms down on the wood. The glory of our kingdom will be revealed to us and not achieved by us. We are to be faithful, to love radically and to suffer willingly in the same way he suffered for us.

This is a night of joy. We know that we are members of a peaceable kingdom. This is given us in the bread and the wine, that is, the body and blood of the paschal victim. Yet, it is getting dark outside. Murder is still a word that has meaning. It was a horrific death for our Lord, and we are subject to the same. Come to this altar. Receive the body and the blood, and remember that in his very giving of his body and blood, Jesus is pointing to his death. At this altar, receive him. And then, when you go outside, your cross will be there. *Amen.*

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⁶ John Allyn Melloh, "Revising Holy Week and Easter Rites," *Passover and Easter*, Vol. 5, 228

⁷ Colossians 3:3