



In the name of him who gives us his body and blood to eat and drink, dear friends in Christ: For our Lenten devotions this year we've been looking at evening hymns. I wanted to stay in that theme for tonight's service, so, before anyone rises to call a technical foul on me claiming that what we just sang isn't in the category of evening hymns, let me say this: it does describe the events that took place on a particular evening. In my book, that qualifies it.

To be precise, the hymn describes the events that took place on what we call the evening of Maundy Thursday, the night our Lord instituted the Sacrament of Holy Communion. It's called *Maundy* Thursday because of the instructions that Jesus gave for his disciples to keep on performing the Sacrament and to love one another – *Maundy* being derived from the same Latin root that gives us such words as *com-mand*, *de-mand*, *mand-atory* and so on. They have to do with imperatives. Do this.

Although, I have to say that calling it Maundy Thursday is a bit of a misnomer. You see, from a Jewish point of view, and Jesus and his disciples were Jews, it wasn't on Thursday evening that these things took place. No, as I pointed out earlier in this series, the movement in Scripture is always from darkness to light. In Genesis it says, "There was evening and morning, the first day"; "evening and morning, the second day"; and so on. Darkness then light. Night then day. And so the Jews considered sunset to be the beginning of the day. The Passover meal that Jesus ate with his disciples and at which he instituted Holy Communion came after sunset Thursday, so from their perspective it was already Friday. And that's kind of nice: Jesus begins Friday by giving his body and blood to his disciples, and ends it by giving his body and blood on the cross. It all happens the same day – the sixth day. And on the seventh day, he rests; his work of redemption all finished. Still, I suppose for our purposes it's less confusing to refer to this evening as part of Maundy Thursday. Besides, Maundy Friday doesn't have the same ring to it.

Turning to the hymn itself, you can see that it's of fairly recent origin. Jaroslav Vajda, who wrote it, was an American hymn writer. His father was a pastor in the Slovak Lutheran Church, which has since become its own district in our Missouri Synod. Vajda was still living when our hymnal was published in 2001, but has since passed away. He died in 2008. In his life time he wrote or translated over 200 hymns, nine of which appear in our hymnal. You're probably most familiar with #922, *Go, My Children, with My Blessing*, a hymn we sometimes use at close of service.

But what the hymn writer attempts to do with work before us is to take us into the mind of Christ on the last day that he will spend with his disciples before his arrest, passion, and death. He starts in the first verse with early Thursday morning, when Jesus awakes. In twenty-four hours he'll be standing before Pilate and a jeering crowd. In twenty-five he'll be tied to a post having the flesh torn from his back by angry whips. In twenty-six he'll be carrying his cross to Golgotha. And in twenty-seven he'll be lifted up, gasping for breath, suspended by nails that were hammered through his hands and feet. He knows all this; and yet on this last day before his passion, he's not thinking of himself. He's thinking about his disciples. He's thinking about those who will come to faith through them and their message. He's thinking about those he came to save. He's thinking about you and me. He's thinking of the reason he came to this earth: to be the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes upon himself the dreadful wages of our sin and who suffers and dies in our place.

He knows he is about to be forsaken by all. The crowd will turn on him. His disciples will abandon him. And his own heavenly Father will bear down on him with the full fury of his wrath against sin. Never will anyone be so utterly bereft of kindness or comfort. And he already begins to feel it. This is part of what's being captured in the second verse. He's tried to explain to his disciples what he's about to go through; but they're oblivious. They are unable to offer any support or encouragement because they just don't get it. He wants them to understand; but they are incapable. Still, he knows they need his strength and support for what they are about to face when he goes through his ordeal. Thus the words, *Never so alone and lonely, longing with tormented heart To be with your dear ones only for a quiet hour apart.*

We then move to the Passover celebration in the upper room. It's a festive meal – one that commemorates God's great deliverance of his people Israel from their bondage in Egypt. In the course of this meal they retell and to a certain degree reenact the story, recalling how the Lord struck down the firstborn of Egypt while his own people were protected by the blood of the paschal lambs. Jesus said that he longed to eat and celebrate this meal with his disciples. Little did they know that everything they talked about that night pointed to Jesus: how he was the firstborn of God who would be struck down for their deliverance, and how he was the paschal Lamb whose blood would protect them from God's judgment.

The second verse ends by recalling that Jesus demonstrated what it means to serve others in humility by washing his disciples' feet at that meal. I'm sure I've mentioned before that the Jews considered foot washing to be a chore so low and dirty that it was against the law to order your slave to do it for you. Even the most proud and wealthy had to do this job for themselves. So Jesus takes on this "lower than slave work" task for them to exemplify how he wants them to love and serve each other in perfect humility. And at the same time, he's foreshadowing how he's about to take on the infinitely lower and more humiliating task of taking their sins upon himself as he wipes the dirt from their feet onto the towel he's wearing.

The third verse takes us to the institution of the Sacrament itself: something Jesus could give to his disciples that would endure through the ages; a lasting will and testament that would continue to bestow on them the gifts of his grace and forgiveness. "Know me as the Lamb of God" the One whom John the Baptizer said takes away the sin of the world. In the context of the Passover meal, there were a lot of connections between the unleavened bread and the cup of wine which Jesus used to institute the Sacrament and the paschal lamb upon which they were feasting. To be sure, the disciples with Jesus at the table did not understand how they connected to Jesus, not yet, anyway; but later they would. Later they'd understand that this lasting memorial Jesus gave them was a way for them indeed to be drawn into his presence and receive from him his own body and blood to nourish them both physically and spiritually unto life everlasting.

Verse four describes the communal nature of the Sacrament. It's not the same as Baptism. Baptism like birth is one per customer. It's an individual thing that happens just one time. You can't share your Baptism with anyone else. But Holy Communion is just that: a group activity. It's a sharing. It involves the idea of table fellowship. With whom do we share? Those who are one with us in faith, that is, those who share our confession of who Jesus is, what he's done, and what he's offering us here in the Sacrament. And this faith that unites us in Christ's love and forgiveness makes it possible for us to love and forgive each other. By it we are enabled to see and understand that we are all the members of Christ's body. St. Paul unpacks this theme in 1 Corinthians chapter 12: how Christ is our head, truly present with us, and we are the various parts of his body each designed by God to perform roles for the good and benefit of the whole. And we are to see each other that way, knowing that what we do for each other –

especially when in love we act to fill needs and alleviate suffering – we are doing those things for Jesus.

The last line of the fourth verse deserves to be highlighted: *One in every place and time*. This points to the transcendent nature of the Sacrament. When we participate in Holy Communion, the roof comes off and walls come down, so to speak. It's not just the immediate congregation with whom we are communing; no, this is communion with Christ and all who by faith are in him. It's why we say "with the angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven ..." We don't see it, not yet; but we confess it because it's true.

And one day we will see it, which is what's described in the fifth verse: that day when all the sad divisions caused by sin and Satan's deceptions will be done away with for good, and all the faithful will share a perfect understanding of Jesus and his saving work. Then we will know him as we are known by him, and together we will share the perfect peace and fellowship we were created for. Then too we will see how every time we joined together to partake in Holy Communion we were given a foretaste of the great heavenly feast of the Lamb, the feast of salvation that goes on forever in his kingdom without end. Therefore with this hymn we confess that the body and blood he gives us now in time will help strengthen and preserve us in faith until we arrive there. May the Lord so fulfill his will for us and bring us all safely there. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!