

MAUNDY THURSDAY – 2021

On the same night that he was betrayed, Jesus took bread. The hands that took the bread were the strong and powerful hands and flexible fingers of a craftsman carpenter. A carpenter takes wood and breaks it in order to transform it. He buys wood as a tree, cuts it into planks and shapes the wood into a plough, a yoke, a table, chair, cupboard or firewood. The trees are transformed so that their part in the daily life of the earth and its people is changed. The tree that absorbed carbon dioxide, produced oxygen and bore fruit becomes a plough to till the food producing earth. What is broken is transformed to fulfil a new purpose.

Jesus took bread and broke it. When bread is broken it is not only to feed, for when it is shared it can transform an acquaintanceship into a friendship. Every piece of broken bread transforms the life of the loaf into something new.

On the same night he was betrayed, Jesus broke bread and shared it with those he called friends if they listened to him and did as he commands them, which was to love one another as he had loved them (Jn 15:14-17). In sharing this broken bread in love with his disciples he commanded them to do this in remembrance of him. The breaking and sharing of this bread in loving memory of him, draws people together and is a sign of their unity. The unity of the broken bread transforms the lives of those who let their self-focus be broken so they can love God more and love others and so be in unity with him and them.

Some hours after the hands of Jesus took bread, these same hands were broken by nails driven into wood that had itself been broken and transformed into an instrument of death.

These were the hands that on the previous night had also taken a towel and a basin and assuming the role of a servant, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. When Peter had difficulty allowing Jesus to serve him, Jesus responded, "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me" (Jn 13:8). A few hours later, another man, Pilate, standing before the crowds of Jerusalem washed his own hands claiming, "I am innocent of this man's blood" (Mt 27:24).

One act of washing was a cleansing and a purification. The other was one of claiming no responsibility for the decision to crucify Jesus that only he, Pilate, was authorised to make. Both of these washings were associated with Jesus. Where do we stand? Is it with Pilate, refusing to accept responsibility for our choices and actions in life? Or is it with Jesus allowing him to serve us and choosing to be open to his love whatever the cost? We have been washed by him at our baptism, but will we receive the broken bread and work on our inner transformation? Will we say 'yes' to the request Jesus made to St Augustine of Hippo, "Open to me and preach me to others."

We are participants in the life and passion of Jesus, not spectators. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9 23). The one who broke the bread and who was broken on the cross invites each of us to be broken of our selfishness in his service so that others will be transformed.

Msgr Harry Entwistle. April 2021