

The One Handed Over
Maundy Thursday Meditation 2023

In Matthew's account of the Last Supper Jesus says when they are all gathered at the table: "Truly, I say to you, one of you will hand me over." Yes, that's the literal meaning of the word. Not "betray", though betrayal was involved, but being "handed over." That's what I want to talk about tonight. Jesus as the one handed over, and about we ourselves when we are being handed over. What can God do with this, among the most painful of human experiences?

When I was growing up, I was told that if I were to make a difference in the world it would be by my action, what I did. So I focused on how God could use my strengths. But what Holy Week is about is of a different order, about how God uses our weakness. We call it Passion Week, and the word passion is the opposite of action. The word means "to be acted upon".

Over and over in most of the gospel accounts and Paul's writings we are told that on this night Jesus was "handed over". It is one of life's most painful experiences. We act. That feels good, sometimes exhilarating. We are acted upon. This feels horrible, painful, humiliating.

In life we are acted upon in all kinds of ways. We go to the hospital. You feel powerless. You are handed over into others' hands. Needles are put in your arms;

you are wheeled to this room and that for tests. Your hospital gown does not quite cover your backside. Even though you are in good hands, it is still a challenge. Even growing older is a kind of being handed over. Do you remember what Jesus said to Peter: “When you were young you clothed yourself and walked where you wanted, but when you are old you will stretch out your hands and another will clothe you and carry you where you don’t wish to go.” (Do I have a witness?)

But there are other ways we are acted upon. Forced retirement, poverty, mental illness, losing a job. Abuse. A woman has been a force for good all her life, unwearied in well doing. Now she is in a nursing facility, “afflicted with time”, as one put it. Divorce happens, for all the ways it happens. Friends leave. You are left.

But Jesus experienced this too, not just acting but being acted upon. And most decisively, this last week. He is handed over to the authorities. He will be tried, handed to one authority after another, flogged, mocked, nailed to a Roman cross for all to see him die this most cruel of deaths. And his passion, his being acted upon, will be for the redemption of the world. Who could believe it!?

Part of our task in life is to join our human action with God’s activity in the world: healing, teaching, loving, making justice, showing kindness, befriending the friendless. But another part of our life task is to let God use our passion, our

being acted upon, what is done *to* us. Can we believe God can use our passion too? For our sake and for the world's sake?

Henri Nouwen says, perhaps startlingly so, that most of our life is passion, a smaller part determined by what we think, so or say. He writes:

“I am inclined to protest against this and to want all to be action, originated by me. But the truth is that my passion is a much greater part of my life than my action. Not to recognize this is a self-deception and not to embrace my passion with love is self-rejection”.

When have you experienced being handed over, acted upon? Can we embrace such moments with love instead of self-hatred or self-despising or just plain despair? This is part of life too, and God can use your passion as God can use your action.

On this night, Jesus could have been all action. He could have mounted a revolution; he could have fled to a safer life. He could have called down an army of angels to protect him. But the integrity of his life would not permit him such paths. He let himself be handed over. He had the faith that God could use his passion, his being acted upon, not just his action, for God's redemptive purpose. And he invites us to embrace with love those occasions when we are handed over, believing the almost unbelievable truth, that God can use this too, us too.

Amen

Communion

Scriptures say that on the night he was handed over, he took the bread and giving thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples. “This bread stands for my body given, given for you and for all, my whole life given for you”, he said. “Take eat, remembering me.” After supper, he took a cup, and said, “This wine is the cup of my life poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Take, drink remembering me.” Let us now share in Jesus’ last supper, and his gift to us today.

Scriptures say that when they had finished “they sang a hymn and went out.” What did they sing? We think what they sang was the part of the Psalms the Hebrew people sang as they climbed the steep hills to Jerusalem on their pilgrimages. One of them was Psalm 118. Hear some of what they sang.

O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good;
God’s steadfast love endures forever.

With the Lord on my side, I do not fear.

The Lord is my strength and my song;

The Lord has become my salvation.

I shall not die, but I shall live

and recount the deeds of the Lord.

O give thanks to the Lord for God is good;

God's steadfast love endures forever.

As they went out into the darkness, it was a song of faith and hope. As we go out into the darkness of the night and tomorrow's death, we are on our way to Daybreak. So we light our candles as we go.