

THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT  
A Sermon for Maundy Thursday, 2011  
On the Text: Propers for the Day  
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

This night has many names: Maundy Thursday, the Night in which He was betrayed, the Night of the Last Supper, the Night of the Agony in the Garden, and some others. Shakespeare had Romeo ask, “What’s in a name? A Rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” To hear that tonight is “the night in which He was betrayed” certainly tells us something that happened to Jesus, but it does not imply for us any of the many other things that happened on that Passover night about 1980 years ago. Most of these names focus on a single event of that very eventful night. None of the names can tell us, or even point us to everything that happened that night. Tonight we shall look at some of the names and some words so that we can see that Jesus was about to do something on the Cross that is seldom talked about, something in addition to being the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world.

The names, “Maundy Thursday: and “The Night of the Last Supper” are related. On that night of the Passover Supper, Jesus gave the disciples two new commandments. The first was given during the institution of the Sacrament of the Eucharist, when Jesus said to them, as we heard in the Epistle Lesson: 1 Corinthians 11:25-26 **25 After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. 26 For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.** St. Luke puts the command to “**Do this in remembrance of Me.**” right after Jesus gives them the Bread in Luke 22: 19-20. Either way, we have a commandment from Jesus that establishes the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ.

The second way these two names are related lies in what Jesus said to the disciples right after Judas Iscariot the Upper Room left to go on his errand of betrayal. One of the choices for the second lesson of Evening Prayer for tonight is John 13: 16-35. The last 5 verses of that say this: <sup>31</sup>When he [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, **"Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. <sup>32</sup>If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. <sup>33</sup>Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.'** <sup>34</sup>**A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to**

love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Jesus gave the disciples, and us, a new commandment. That phrase, "new commandment", showed up in the early Latin Bibles as "*Mandatum Novum*". *Mandatum* is the root of the English word, *mandate*. *Maundy* turns out to be a corruption of the French word for a command which was *mandé*. That happened sometime around 1300, which was a time when many French words were coming into English. So, Maundy Thursday is the day of the new commandment, and there are actually two of them: the first being "Do this in remembrance of Me" and the second being "to love one another as Jesus loved us." Tonight, I want to take a look into the first of these commandments.

In the Epistle lesson for tonight, St. Paul essentially melds together and harmonizes the three versions of the Institution of Holy Communion that are given by Saints Matthew, Mark, and Luke in their Gospels. St. John does not mention the Eucharist in his Gospel. Where did St. Paul get his knowledge of what happened that night? Apparently directly from Jesus, either in the vision on the road to Damascus on sometime in the 14 years he spent in Arabia and Syria which he described in brief in Galatians 1 and 2. In Second Corinthians 12 and Galatians 2 he speaks of being taken up to the third heaven and of having received a revelation, so I think we can trust St. Paul's account to have put the events together in the right order. This is why we use his words from First Corinthians 11 almost verbatim in the Prayer of Consecration. As he says in the first line of the Epistle lesson, that he received it "[from the Lord](#)".

There is one small problem with this, and it certainly does not have anything to do with what God told St. Paul; it has to do with how it is told to us. We get this message as a translation from Greek into English, and that is where the little problem comes from. It is just a matter of the meaning of one word.

This year, 2011, is the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible, which was published in 1611. In its day, it was the best translation of the Bible into English that had ever been done, and it is in the beautiful English of that day. It was from earlier versions of the English Bible and from the KJV that we got the language that is in the BCP, with the readings for Epistle and Gospel lessons being essentially unchanged since 1662. The thing is that since that

time, more and earlier manuscripts of the Bible have been discovered, and a lot more has been learned about Biblical Greek and Hebrew.

That one word that causes the small problem is the Greek word, **διαθήκη**, which can mean either a testament, in the sense of a “last will and testament”, or it can mean a covenant. Which of those meanings it takes depends on the context. There is a Hebrew word, *berit*, that is much like **διαθήκη** in that it has the same two meanings. However, the thing about last wills and testaments is that they don’t take effect until the person who made one dies. God can’t make a “last will and testament” that would be meaningful because He will never die; but He uses the word, *berit*, a lot of times in the OT. And every time He uses it, it gets translated into English as *covenant*. The fact is that when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in the middle of the third century BC, (~250 BC) to make what is called the Septuagint, *berit* always was translated as **διαθήκη**. It is kind of a mystery why **διαθήκη** was so often translated as *testament* in the older translations of the New Testament, when it should have been *Covenant*. When we look in modern translations of the Bible, we find that almost all of them give verse 25 of our Epistle lesson as this: 1 Cor. 11:25 [25 In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."](#)

Among the many things Jesus did that night was that He established a New Covenant between God and Man, and that Covenant also has many names, two of which are: the Covenant of Grace and the Covenant of Redemption. There is one thing that that we need to know about all of the Covenants between God and Man, and that is that they are all initiated by God; and that is because a Covenant is a bond in blood, sovereignly administered. In the relationship between God and Man, Man is never sovereign, the only true sovereign is God.

God makes the rules, not Man; and one of the rules He made was that Covenants had to be sealed with blood and that every Covenant has a sign. The Covenant with Noah was sealed with the sacrifices of “clean animals” described in Genesis 8:20-21, and the sign is the rainbow as God said in Genesis 9:13. The other Covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David were similarly sealed and signed. The sign of the Abrahamic Covenant was circumcision, while the sign of the Mosaic Covenant was the tablets of the Law; and the sign of the Covenant with David was the throne from which a descendant of his would rule the earth.

The New Covenant has a sign that is somewhat like that of the Covenant with Abraham in that there is something that must happen to every person who wants to be a party to the New

Covenant, this time to both male or female. That something is Baptism. However, in the New Covenant of Grace, there is no more need to shed blood to either seal the Covenant or to seal a person into the Covenant Body. That was done with the shedding of Jesus' Blood on the Cross. His sacrifice of Himself on the Cross served two major purposes: First and foremost, it was the atoning sacrifice for all the sins of mankind; Secondly, the shedding of his blood sealed the New Covenant of Redemption with Man. His resurrection confirmed that the New Covenant was the last Covenant, that there would be no more need for blood sacrifices.

Those eleven that remained with Jesus and heard Him say what St. Paul recorded in 1 Corinthians 11:25 **"This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."** They did not know He would die the next day and so, would not have understood the last verse of our Epistle lesson, which is something St. Paul said: 1 Corinthians 11:26 **26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.** Jesus knew what would happen the next day. He knew what would happen after the Sun rose the next morning, that what awaited Him was the Cross while they had no idea what was about to happen; He knew the significance of His Death and Resurrection, and they did not. They would have to wait until Pentecost for that understanding to be given to them..

After the end of our Epistle lesson, St. Paul continues in First Corinthians 11 by talking about the benefits and the dangers in partaking of the Bread and Wine that are called the Body and Blood of Christ. You will hear that tonight when I read the Exhortation.

One of the greatest resources we have that tells us about the blood of the Covenant is the Epistle to the Hebrews, especially in its 9<sup>th</sup> chapter. In Hebrews 9, verses 18 - 20 tell us of the sealing of the Covenant of Moses: **18 Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. 19 For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, 20 saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you."**

After telling us in verse 21 of the sprinkling of the tent and the utensils, verse 22 tells us partly why Jesus had to die a bloody death: **22 Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.**

One reason that we in this church have what is called a "high view" of the Sacrament of Holy Communion is what St. Paul said in verse 27 just after our Epistle lesson: 1 Corinthians 11:27

27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Thomas Cranmer's view of the Communion was that the Bread is bread and the Wine is wine, but if we take them worthily, we spiritually receive the Body and Blood of Christ, the Body and Blood of the New Covenant. In doing so, we also proclaim our faith as St. Paul said in the last verse of the Epistle lesson: 1 Corinthians 11:26 <sup>26</sup>For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. I say, we not only proclaim His death, we also proclaim His Resurrection, without which His death would have little meaning. Also, in receiving the Holy Eucharist, we receive that "great benefit" that St. Paul speaks of.

Verses 20 and 21 of the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews are a fitting close for this message this evening: Hebrews 13:20-21 20 Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, 21 equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.