

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Thursday, April 02, 2026
Maundy Thursday

The Mass of the Lord's Supper
5:30 pm

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A Sermon by
Professor Sarah Coakley

on

Exodus 12:1-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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Address 5: Love

‘Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end’ (John 13. 1)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

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There is a story told of Ronald Knox, the famous Anglican convert to Roman Catholicism who went on to be Catholic chaplain to Oxford University, and became a great (and witty) influence on many students. As a child, and the youngest of a brilliant clerical family, he was exceptionally precocious, and doubtless therefore intellectually overstimulated, so that even at the tender age of three – when he was already mastering the Greek alphabet, it is said – he had considerable problems with insomnia. When one of his formidable aunts asked him what he *did* when he could not sleep, the three-year-old Ronnie replied, ‘Well, aunt, I just lie there and think about the past’.

We too are gathered here tonight, from the perspective of much longer years, to ‘think about the past’. But we come this night, as every Maundy Thursday, to *re*-think it, *re*-member it, in a new way, a way that opens onto an ecstasy of love beyond all worldly loves – that special ecstasy of love to which Jesus invites his followers.

But first we have to confront the problem of what normally happens when we think about the past in the order of the world, when we toss and turn on our own beds in the dark, either with poignant memories of happiness or innocence long gone, or with sharp resentments for those who have worsted or humiliated us, or – more threateningly – with flashback experiences of abuse or betrayal which our conscious psyches tell us we should better repress or forget. To think about the past, to open the Pandora’s box of the memory, is, as St. Augustine stressed so pointedly long ago, to expose the detritus of one’s human vulnerability in all its complexity, all its moral ambiguity. Often it is to strain to find meaning where meaning, and love, have seemed to desert us.

I have no idea what the young Ronnie Knox, aged three, thought about in the middle of the night. Was it good memories of love and celebration and play and holidays? Or was it, in his precocity, already also memories of things to be worried about, fears of the dark, fears of aloneness and abandonment, fears of loss and parental mortality (which he had already experienced)? I suspect so. It is the stuff of humanity.

In our own meditations this week we have reflected out of the memory of the Bible on the themes of invitation, of gift, and of betrayal. We began from the great Isaianic vision of a vineyard of love inhabited by workers with a terrible *amnesia* (loss of memory) about the fulfillment of all desires which God had promised for them there. We saw how, in the economy of sin and manipulation, that fatal loss of memory was distorted into the idea that one can only flourish if someone else is diminished instead, and careful accounts are kept: I give to you, but only on condition you give back – or else. We saw, last night, how Passion, at its sacred core, confronts this malaise of false order by a willingness to be ‘handed over’: handed over to a place beyond accounting and individualistic striving, where – strangely – one is no longer ‘alone’ but transported into a different and economy of ‘glory’ in Jesus’s Passion, an economy of love so excessive that it embarrasses us, just as that tearful woman embarrassed the guests with her wasted nard poured on Jesus’s feet.

But it is one thing to think all this through, to begin to follow the thread theologically; it is quite another to do it, because when we *try* to do it by our own *fiat* we once again implicitly apply the old order of control: let *me* fix this, we fantasize. And when we do so try, with all the good will and fine intentions we can muster, we discover that the problem of old scores lies too deeply in our distorted memories, so as to be inscribed into our very flesh.

Is not this, then, why Jesus give us some very specific *things to do* in order to ‘re-member’ our dark past into his future of love, to re-educate even the flesh beyond the distortions of competition and conquest? And so tonight, before he goes out into the dark to confront his own unspeakable pain and agony and loneliness, the authentic marks of his humanity, Jesus first opens the door to the mystery of how transformed memory and love can, in him, coincide with perfection – how through the love commandment that he gives us, and the special act of memory he demands of us in footwashing and bread and wine, we may find our way back into the vineyard of love that we have repeatedly despoiled but long to re-enter. Instead of *explaining* a theological conundrum, he gives us, by example, his own body, and asks us together to re-member it and ingest it together: this will become the supernatural ‘medicine of immortality’, the only possible cure for poisoned memory and lost love. Instead of providing a *disquisition* on charity, he commands by example, taking a towel and emulating the shocking example of that woman in distress, to his disciples’ continuing dismay. But as in the lovely little Jewish story of the newly-wed couple, *Joseph and Asanath*, where Asanath insists that only she will wash her beloved’s feet, not any despised servant who would normally do the dirty job, so here with Jesus and his friends: this act of communion, and of unity, prescinds from all worldly stratifications of order into an ecstasy of love. This is no act of worthy service, as the church, alas, has also often made it, but of almost shocking intimacy, the perfect intimation of a love beyond calculation. As the gospel of John puts it so strikingly, it flows directly out of the perfect relation of Jesus to his Father, his knowledge that ‘he has come from God and is going to God, and that God has put everything into his hands’ (John 13. 3). Here is the only circle of love in which obeisance is glory, without servile fear, and without manipulation.

‘Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end’. Tonight we lie again in the dark, like the little Ronnie Knox, and think about the past. But tonight the past is new once more because we enter into a ‘mystery’ (as the early church so rightly called the sacraments) of renewal and transformation to be endlessly repeated up to our own deaths, in which we dispose ourselves again and again – ourselves, our souls and bodies – into an act of ‘re-membering’ not of our own, until even our flesh reflects his new order of love beyond resentment, beyond aloneness and despair. Now, when, in the dark, we ‘think about the past’ we are drawn into Jesus’s Passion and his royal road to glory. So be it. *Amen*.

