

ONLINE EASTER TRIDUUM 2021
Reflections with Fr Matt Blake, OCD - *Holy Thursday*
1st April 2021, at the Carmelite Church¹, Kensington

This is Holy Thursday, the beginning of our Easter Triduum, the most important days of our Christian year and this afternoon's reflection is on the Last Supper. I am drawing particularly from John's Gospel, Chapters 13 to 17, this long section on the Last Supper. The author of the gospel sums it up for us when he says that Jesus wants to show us how perfect his love is. That's what it's all about. That's what he wants to show us and those who are gathered around the table at the Last Supper – but that is also all of us, all disciples through all the ages – and he does so, and he needs to do so, because he knows that within twenty-four hours he will have died. And he knows that the next twenty-four hours and all the consequences of that later are going to very seriously challenge his disciples. This is going to be the greatest obstacle for them, the greatest difficulty for them to face, both as disciples themselves and as the church of the future.

There are two ways we could approach this. One, we could sit at that table and be one of those disciples and of course we are, we always are, we're always at the Last Supper, we're always seated there with Jesus; that's what discipleship is. But we could also approach it from the perspective of Jesus. Jesus looks around the table, looks around at the twelve and undoubtedly there are many other people there as well and he looks at them, and he looks at them with great love and he wants them to know how perfect his love is. And if we look then at this last supper we see that it begins with the washing of the feet. Those of you who will attend Mass later today will hear that as the Gospel. This year we can't physically do washing of feet, but we can reflect upon it. In a major gesture he symbolically demonstrates to them this perfect love. Then he goes on for a number of chapters of teaching, some wonderful teaching, some of which is so familiar to us, some of the favourite passages of all the gospels are to be found there. We often forget that we pluck these lovely little bits out of context, we forget that the context is the Last Supper – Jesus is preparing his disciples for his own death. In Chapter 17, Jesus turns to God the Father in prayer, but of course we are invited into that prayer, to become part of that prayer, to make that prayer ours. So we are invited in the conversation of Jesus with the Father, and we are invited into the conversation with Jesus and his disciples, all those around the table.

What I want to do now as our reflection for today is pick out some nuggets to help us to enter this. I want to pick out one line from Chapter 13; Jesus is saying to his disciples, *I give you a new commandment, love one another just as I have loved you. You also must love one another.* We're all very familiar with that, we have heard it many times. *Love one another* is not original, that's there right throughout the Bible – what is original here is *love one another as I have loved you.* To understand that we need to set it in its context. Just before this, Jesus has spoken about the betrayal of Judas, and Judas then, we're told, leaves, and night falls – he enters into the darkness. Immediately after Jesus has given this teaching he directly addresses Peter, *you're going to betray me, you're going to deny that you know me; you're going to deny any knowledge of me before the cock crows.* So he speaks about this love in the midst of betrayal, denial, rejection, abandonment by those who were closest to him. That's the

kind of love he is speaking about, a love that is not in any way compromised, or distorted or minimalized by whatever happens. This love is perfect love. Or as St Teresa puts it, *it's a love that has no self-interest whatsoever* and that's the kind of love Jesus is showing us, a love with no self-interest whatsoever and it is that love with which he will go to the Cross. The Cross is the greatest demonstration of love, a love that has no self-interest whatsoever. So that's the first thing Jesus is saying to these first disciples, who wouldn't know how to deal with this. This is a major crisis; Jesus to whom they have committed their lives, who they have become followers of, is going to die. Peter, their leader, is going to deny ever knowing Jesus. Judas, one of their close friends, a colleague, is going to do even worse than betray Jesus and be the cause of his being arrested and all of this happening. So Jesus looks at them and thinks, what advice am I going to give them to help them to cope? *Love one another*. We find this repeated several times throughout this sermon. Just love.

I am reminded of St Teresa in *The Interior Castle*. In *the Fourth Dwelling Place*, she gives that instruction exactly – whatever happens, whatever is going on, just love; wherever there are opportunities to love, just take them. And it is very significant where Teresa gives this teaching. Those familiar with the seven dwelling places in the *Interior Castle* will know that the fourth dwelling place, the central one, is the time of transition. Transition from an old life to a new life, transition from an old way of relating with God to a new way of relating and it's a time when the person doesn't know what's going on, the person knows that things are changing, that nothing is ever the same, but they really don't know what's going on and they don't know how to cope. *How do we deal with this? What do we do here?* There's no road map any more, none of the old ways work any more. Teresa's advice was *just love*, just approach everything with love, react to everything with love, deal with every situation with love. That's the advice Jesus gave at the Last Supper to his disciples – *just love*. He demonstrates this with the washing of the feet, but particularly he demonstrates it by the fact that he washes both Judas' feet and Peter's feet, and washes all our feet.

Love one another – that's the first instruction – *as I have loved you*. That is a love that is beyond what we are now capable of and that's why he says to Peter, *where I'm going you won't be able to come, but you will later be able to come*. That doesn't mean going somewhere physically, it's much deeper than that, it means being able to love in this way. Peter is simply not capable of that. Where Jesus is going, it is deeper and deeper into love, going deeper and deeper into the self-giving that real pure love requires. Peter is not able to go there, hence he will deny knowing Jesus, but Jesus is sure that there will come a time when he will be able to go there, he will follow there. Where Jesus has gone, Peter will follow. And every disciple will. We are not able to get there now, but we will.

The second thing I want to pick out is from John Ch.14:27. Peace – a wonderful word. He said, *Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you*. So peace is his gift to those around the table, to all disciples, and it is not any peace. It is not a peace that we can acquire or create, or earn or achieve, it's a peace we cannot give ourselves or each other. Only he can give us this peace because it is his peace – the world cannot give it, but he can. And it is with this peace that he is living the last supper and it is with this peace that he goes to the Cross and to his death. Just as we cannot give ourselves this peace, the world around us cannot give it to us, neither can anything take it away. All those

responsible for the death of Jesus, the world that puts Jesus to death, the forces that put him to death, have no power over the peace that he has got. Likewise, they have no power over the peace that he gives us. So trust in that peace, believe in that peace – you’ve got it, we’ve got it. The fact that he is in our lives, he gives it to us; we’ve got it. Believe in it and trust it, that peace that he gives, that’s what the disciple has, that’s what enables the disciple to do great things, that’s what enables the disciple to truly follow Jesus. So that’s his parting gift and a great gift it is, because it is the gift that will enable us, as disciples, to follow him.

The third little nugget I want to pluck out of this is in some way related to the peace – it’s *joy*. John Ch.15:11: *I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy may be complete*. Joy – what do we mean by joy? I want to look at two short texts from St John of the Cross, which will perhaps help us to enter more deeply into what this joy is. The first text is from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book 3 Ch.17, and in this part of John’s writings he particularly focuses on whatever it is that is an obstacle to our total and complete following of Jesus Christ. He’s looking at joy and what joy is and here he gives us a definition, *joy is nothing else than a delight of the will in an object esteemed and considered fitting*. So the will delights in something that is esteemed and considered fitting. Those are the two criteria. He goes on, *the will should rejoice only in what is for the honour and glory of God and the greatest honour we can give Him is to serve Him according to evangelical perfection. Anything un-included in such service is without value to human beings*. In other words, let’s put that in simpler language – joy comes to us when our wills, our hearts, our love are set on God and on everything that is right, that is true, that is pure, that is good, etc. Or we could put it the other way around, and this is when John is teaching when something is not to be esteemed: if something does not have value but we set our hearts upon it, then our joy is compromised, we do not have pure joy.

So Jesus is going to the Cross with his heart set on one thing only, the will of his Father in heaven. He is going to the Cross loving everybody with a perfect love, therefore there is nothing in Jesus’ mind, attitude, heart, will, that is not right, that is not to be esteemed. Another way of putting it is that Jesus dies that our joy be complete, that we will know what complete joy is. There is a paradox here, and we could well say to ourselves *it must have been gloomy at the last supper knowing about his death. Where is the space for joy here?* But of course there is – joy and suffering go together – that’s something that John of the Cross understands so well. That brings me to the second text from John’s *Spiritual Canticle*, the commentary on Stanza 36 (Ch. 12): *the purest suffering brings with it the purest and most intimate knowing and consequently the purest and highest joy, because it is a knowing from further within*. What does that mean? That’s something that is beyond all rational understanding. Rationally it’s impossible, but the mystics like John of the Cross and so many other mystics understood this so well. I think of a line from another Carmelite mystic, Edith Stein, where she said there is no contradiction between the suffering of the Cross and the joy of the Christian, the two go together. Here John is telling us that the purer the suffering is, the purer and higher the joy. Joy and suffering go together, they are not contraries or opposites, but they go together. The greatest of suffering and the greatest of joy are the one reality, they are not just two things mixed together, they are the one reality, they are the living, the going deeply into the mystery of who Jesus is, the mystery of what it is to be a disciple of Jesus. *So that your joy be complete* – that’s the term that Jesus uses, very deliberately. He

wants us to have this complete joy because he's got it; he's going to the Cross with this complete joy. He's saying to his disciples *this is the road to go on, come this way, follow me where I am going and you will have this joy, because there is no other way, there is no other road.* So joy, joy that is so important.

Something else from this great sermon that we have here – Jesus speaks frequently about the Holy Spirit or the Advocate and he tells us that it is necessary for him to go, because if he doesn't go, the Holy Spirit cannot come. One line from John Ch.16:13, *when the Spirit of Truth comes He will lead you to the complete Truth.* The Spirit of Truth will lead you to the complete Truth. So Jesus is saying to his disciples and to all of us, that this event that we're partaking in, his death and resurrection, is going to bring about a new way of relating to God, a new relationship with God, a relationship with God that has not been known up until now. If we think of that in terms of the Scriptures, we have God the Father; Jesus now in his life and his disciples know him as the Son of God and he has revealed who he is to them, but he has got to go so that a new kind of relationship can emerge, and that is the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the one that he is sending. And the Holy Spirit, he tells us, will lead us to the complete truth. It's not a different truth to the truth that Jesus taught, but rather it is an entering more deeply into it. He is going to lead us more deeply into the truth of who God is and how we relate to God. So Jesus is saying to his disciples: I am going, I am leaving you, I'm dying. But I'm not leaving you, God is not leaving you, rather this great loss that you are going to experience is the doorway or the gateway or the point of entry into something that is new, that is deeper, that is more profound. Of course, when we think about it, that's repeated over and over again in our lives, in all the processes of growth and transformation that we go through in our lives. Often it is those experiences that we think are disasters or the end that can really be the beginning of something new, something deeper, something more real and true. That is what he is saying to his disciples, this is not an end, it's a beginning, it is a new beginning. Death is not an end but a beginning. This is not a journey to death but it is a journey to new life, to a new beginning and the Spirit is the sign of this, that Jesus has to die that we may live, Jesus has to die that he may live in us more fully, more completely, and he will come and he will make his home in us.

One further nugget from John's gospel, Ch.16: 8. Jesus is talking about the descent of the Spirit, *I will send him to you and when he comes he will show the world how wrong it was...* The world – we could misunderstand John's gospel and think that the world is somehow depicted as the enemy of Jesus, as something bad. No. *God so loved the world that he gave his only son.* Jesus died to save the world. God loves the world; God loves everything that he created. God saw all that he made and indeed it was very good. The whole coming of Jesus, the presence of Jesus in our world shows us how much God loves this world. Rather, what the enemy is, what the darkness is, consists of an attitude or a way of thinking that is in our world that is contrary to truth, that is contrary to God, and it is that worldly way of thinking that leads to the death of Jesus. It is that worldly way of thinking that is the great obstacle and will be the great obstacle and it will be the great obstacle also for his disciples. So the death of Jesus, as Jesus explains it to us here in these chapters, this long speech that he gives at the last supper, leads to, or opens up a new relationship with the world. A disciple of Jesus is not just somebody in a new and deeper relationship with God. We don't become disciples just to relate to God in a new and deeper way – which of course we do, a disciple of Jesus relates with God more deeply than anyone

– but the disciple is also in a new relationship with the world, the disciple sees the world, sees reality, everything around, in a whole new way. The world is not enemy, the world rather is the great manifestation of the wisdom of God and the beauty of God, but what the disciple has – with the presence and help of the Holy Spirit – is the ability to understand the world, to see the truth, to live by the truth, to be set free by the truth, to rejoice in the truth, to bear witness to the truth, to live and die for the truth, to suffer for the truth, to give one's life for the truth. That's the life of the disciple and that's what Jesus is setting out before his disciples in this speech at the last supper.

So these are some nuggets from this speech. There's so much else and I have only picked randomly a few things, but I did so because I want to reflect on the thinking of Jesus. What's going through the mind of Jesus at the last supper? We've been told by the author that what he wants, what his purpose is, is to show how perfect his love is. He wants the disciples to know how perfect his love is. He loves them, he loves them with his perfect love so therefore he wants them to know this and be able to live by it. So he doesn't give them some kind of consolation or reassurance, he gives them something much more than that. He knows that the only way that they can really live this, get through it and come to see and understand it in the right way is by truly becoming ever more deeply his disciples. The way he prepares them for his death is by giving them this vast treasury of teaching and giving them this example that they can live by, that will enable them to become more and more his disciples. So don't sit around being sad, that's not the way to deal with death, don't sit around regretting what has been lost, rather, embrace the opportunity, come to a deeper knowledge of and understanding of what it means to be a disciple. That's what Jesus does at the last supper, that's what he's giving his disciples. If they can really enter deeply into this, they will see the truth of what is happening. And the real proof of this is in how they're going to deal with suffering, how they're going to face suffering, how they're going to enter into the new understanding of suffering that the suffering and death of Jesus gives. If they can enter into suffering, if they can face the suffering of their lives with the kind of openness and generosity and self-giving with which Jesus approaches his death, then suffering, no matter how great it may be, will never defeat them, suffering will never take away the peace and the joy that Jesus gives to them. Suffering will never separate them from Jesus – rather, and only the mystery of God can understand this – suffering will become the way into which they will enter ever more deeply into this perfect love, suffering itself becomes something that is transformed and death itself becomes something that is transformed. The two most difficult things that a disciple of Jesus must face, just like the most difficult things that any human being must face, are suffering in all its forms, whatever way it may come to us, and it will come to everybody in some form or other; and death, which comes to everybody also, and again in one way or other. There are so many ways in which they can come, but Jesus faces both suffering and death. Trusting in His Father, he faces both of them with love, with a love that is total, complete, uncompromised and it is with that love that he reaches out to his disciples at the last supper.

We have no idea how they must have felt, but we can listen and I recommend to you that you read these chapters from John's gospel. Let them be your prayer and reflection. *Listen to them*, listen to them in the context of your life now, listen to them with the eyes of what is going on in your life now, what is your reality now, listen to

these words, listen to this teaching, listen to Jesus opening up his heart, the deep treasures and wisdom that he lives by. Listen to Jesus as he gives his disciples what they are going to need for the future, when he gives the disciples the only explanation he can give them, but what he is giving them is truly what they most need. So the last supper is this wonderful intimate moment with Jesus. He opens his heart and his mind, he pours out his love, and let us just pray that over these days we also may be enriched and enlightened by this wisdom and this love.

We pray God's blessing upon us as we enter into the deepest, most profound, most life-giving celebration of our Christian year of the whole mystery of what it means to be Christian. Amen

¹ This Holy Thursday reflection was given by Fr Matt Blake and broadcast on video simultaneously from the Carmelite Church, Kensington and from the Centre for Applied Carmelite Spirituality at Boars Hill. Transcribed by a member of the Discalced Carmelite Secular Order. An audio recording is available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wrx9OqSdJRP9DpBuZ_wgl5YD2J_jUH9B/view?usp=sharing

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