

Maundy Thursday – March 24, 2005
Grace Church in Haddonfield,
“Beware the Crumbling Bridges of Faith!”
The Rev’d Dr Patrick R. Close

The Holy Scriptures tonight retells the story of Jesus’ last night with his disciples. The events that transpire speak of the first Holy Eucharist, community, love and the foot washing. What is presented to us tonight is the beginning of the Easter Triduum, the three days that are foundational to our Christian faith. The next three days shape the center of the Passion Narrative. They are the bridges between the past and the present, God and us, between each other and us.

Bridges are interesting things. I worked as a lobbyist for the truck industry before I went into the ministry. I became familiar with the automotive industry, highways, and bridges. The network of our highways is the means by which nearly 90% of our goods come to us. The orange juice we drank this morning came from Florida. The milk came from the countryside of New Jersey or Pennsylvania. The coffee or tea we had arrived into a port on this coast, and went by truck to get to us. Our transportation system is a wide and vast array that connects us with the rest of the country and the world. We depend on it for most of our food, clothing and more!

Bridges are the links over rivers that have to be forded to reach us. Bridges are a way to understand our liturgy and faith practices. They provide us with the links, the connections that are necessary to help us be the people of God. The sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion link us in a profound and special way to God, Jesus and each other. They are part of the bridge that forms our faith. There are other parts that bridge our faith as well.

What state are the bridges of our faith in tonight? Are they in good shape? Do they support us as we travel the road of life? Or has our faith suffered from the same fate as our nation’s infrastructure ... neglect, apathy, overlooked ... to the point that like the bridges around us, our faith is crumbling?

I recently read that there are more than ½ million bridges in our country. An article in the “Nation’s Business” some years ago warned that highway and bridge infrastructure was crumbling. It threatens to undermine the health of our economy since our vitality is linked to a current highway system that is barely meeting our current needs. In 1996, AAA raised the alarm that our bridges needed \$315 billion to bring the infrastructure up to snuff! They said we needed a 5-year commitment of \$72 billion to just put our bridges back in a stable state. (Just as aside, how much did our Congress and President just vote and pass to fund the Iraq war ... \$80 billion!). AAA says that we can’t sit idle, develop a long-term and comprehensible plan and to ACT NOW!

This made me wonder about how much investment we are putting into our own faith. We go to Church regularly, but are that enough to build the necessary infrastructure to get us through the challenges of life? Have we ignored essential parts of our faith that threaten our bridges?

The more I read about bridges, the more interested I became. I found some research that didn’t do much to enhance my trust of the bridges that are part of our highways. It became clear that the crumbling infrastructure runs deeper than I thought. In the 2000 data from DOT, I read that

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44%, almost one out of every two bridges in New Jersey are either “structurally deficient” or “functionally obsolete.” On the interstate highway system, the figures were only mildly better, 27% fell into this category. That means a little more than one out of four bridges were in this dangerous state.

Think about that every time you go over the Ben Franklin, Walt Whitman, Betsy Ross or Tacony Bridges. Think about that as you go over the Cooper River or Rancocas Creek. Think about that when you go over the Delaware Memorial Bridge. We take these bridges for granted, but many of them are part of a crumbling infrastructure. Makes you wonder what’s underneath us as we travel over the highways, eh?

There is a need to take this discussion about bridges and apply it to our faith. The New Testament calls us into a new life in Christ. Tonight is one of those important nights that talk about the formation of the Christian Church. The Hebrews were formed into the people of God by the events of the Exodus. The story of the Passover points out many things that are part of us as well. There is a fellowship that gathers in the houses ... people called to be God’s chosen people.

The book of Exodus speaks about remembering. The people of Israel are told to remember the events of Passover because they form the story that makes them God’s people. The blood of the lambs was put on the doorposts. They were sacrifices so that the angel of death would pass over the houses of the Hebrews. They ate the meal in haste, awaiting the call to be free and leave their slavery. Behind all of this, God was acting to save his people. A new faith community was formed by this event. The Exodus becomes the bridge that will unite the people into the Jews. It will be the link to God that is remembered with every Passover.

The readings from Corinthians and John are part of our story. They provide bridges that link us with God, Jesus and the Christian community. Paul speaks about the sacrament of Holy Communion. He remembers the last night Jesus was alive with his disciples. He tells us to remember what Jesus has done in what we call Holy Communion. Jesus embodies the love of God. He shares with us insight into how to live into that community. He is the bridge between the Divine One and us. The wine and bread come to be the blood and body sacrificed for us ... that we might be freed from sin and death. We are to remember this every time we gather for Holy Communion. This is the ongoing link with Jesus instituted on this night nearly 2,000 years ago.

The reading from John speaks of the commandment to love. Jesus was the incarnation of God. He shows us the way to live our lives that we might be bridged with God. The foot washing becomes the story of serving that we are called to imitate. We are to be people, who care for others, serve others, in the name of Jesus. It is part of our infrastructure. It is part of what it means to be a Christian. It’s not just enough to do one or two things occasionally and to think we are on a solid foundation. What shape is our infrastructure in now? Have we taken care to build the bridges of faith that remember and reflect the life of Jesus? Or is our infrastructure crumbling underneath us?

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This night is one to retell and relive the story of that last night of Jesus. Tonight is the night to recommit us to the way of Jesus. We are not only to remember, but we are to act now! It is so easy to forget, to ignore our relationship with God and the faith community. This night calls us to be Christians in more than words. Our actions need to reflect the gift of love that was given to us by Jesus. We are commanded to live life differently, as servers ... not the served, as freed people ... not slaves to sin and death.

This night is about bridges. We are invited to spend the time and effort to reinforce, reconstruct or rebuild those bridges of faith that will help carry us through the journey of life. It takes time and it takes effort. It takes us remembering and us doing. It takes accepting the gift of God in Jesus and making him the center of all that we do. If we can do this, with God’s help, we will live into the new life that is coming. Tonight sends us down the road, over the bridge ...into the kingdom of God.