

A New Commandment

May 06, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

The Gospel for today finds us, once again in the *upper room*, on the night of the betrayal. I have often wondered what it was *really* like in that room.

Whenever the world of motion pictures, movies, tries to portray the scene with Jesus and his disciples in that room, the atmosphere is always one of utter serenity. Jesus moves among his disciples calmly, his gestures are quiet and restrained, his speech low and captivating. Usually the disciples are seated in rapt and attentive silence, their gaze fixed on their Master. I suspect the reality was very different. First of all, it is not in the culture to which Jesus and the disciples belonged to behave at a meal with the serenity that western artists tend to impose upon them. But, there are other and grimmer reasons why we can be almost certain that the scene was very far from tranquil.

It is possible to make an educated guess that the air was electric with tension that the sweaty smell of fear

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was obvious, and that fear was also betrayed by the heightening of the disciples' voices and the sharpening of their gestures. In fact, if we have any doubts about these things, we have only to listen to the voices John's gospel captures for us in the three readings associated with the Collect for the Day in the liturgical cycle. As we listen to those voices, it may occur to us that, as an occasion to communicate ultimate insights regarding an embryonic faith about to be launched, this gathering left much to be desired. Judas has already left the room.

Jesus is speaking to his followers quietly but intensely. He has left until this moment the great commandment he wishes to give them. *A new commandment I give unto you*, he says, *that you love one another* (Jn. 13:34). Silence. Nobody knows quite what to say, or indeed if he wishes them to say anything. Then Peter speaks. He makes no reference to the new commandment; it's obvious he has not really

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heard it. He *will* hear it and *live* it and *sacrifice* his life to it in years to come, but at this moment his mind is full of an agonizing suspicion that this night is the prelude to dreadful possibilities he cannot even specify. Rather like a lost frightened child speaking to a departing parent, Peter asks, *Lord where are you going?* (v.36) and *why cannot I follow you now?* (v. 37). There is a quiet misery in every syllable. A moment later he is probably totally demoralized by Jesus saying, *the cock will not crow until you have denied me three times* (v. 38b).

The evening stumbles along. Jesus is speaking of going before them to prepare a place for them. This time it is Thomas who can stand the vagueness no longer. There is an edge of anger in his words as he asks, *how can we know the way* (14:v5)? Jesus looks at him, perhaps even goes up to him and says *I am the way, and the truth, and the life* (v. 6). There is no reply from Thomas, but I would guess he might have

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shaken is head, baffled by a response, to him, just as elusive and undefined as the statements that had triggered his question in the first place.

But Thomas is not alone. Only moments later, as Jesus mentions the Father, Philip expresses the same bewilderment as Thomas: *Lord, show us the Father and we shall be satisfied* (v. 8). His whole attitude is one of asking for clarification, for precise data, for something solid to cling to in the present ghastly situation where fear of the unknown is in the very air they breathe.

Peter and Thomas and Philip all wanted facts. They wanted things defined. Many of us do. The fact that we do gives some of us problems in relating to the faith, to Scripture, and to the church itself. It is not always easy to come to terms with the fact that the heart of the Christian faith is essentially a mystery. I'm not saying for one second that our faith is not

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based on facts and specific events, but these facts and events are surrounded by what can never be fully and neatly defined. The late, great Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey is remembered for many things, and also for having said, that in the Christian faith, there is what he called *the story and the glory* (“Glory Descending,” Michael Ramsey and his writings, Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2005). The former can be told to a child; the latter defeats the greatest human intellect.

As with the three disciples on that night long ago, we yearn for facts, for complete clarity and precision, for immediately understandable answers. But when the Collect for today speaks of *truly to know* and **perfectly to know**, it is not referring to this kind of knowing. There is something of a paradox here that we must recognize. The prayer speaks of knowing Christ that we may follow in his steps. The mysterious truth is that the following does not come after we

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know certain information and facts. The knowing comes in the *following*. This thought may make some of us identify with the frustration of Peter, Thomas and Philip in the upper room, but the paradox is true. Knowing Jesus Christ comes in the following of his steps, and this is why it does not take a great intellect to know him. It merely takes faithfulness.

AMEN.