

Crown of Thorns:

Readings for the Maundy Thursday Tenebrae Service

by Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder

I. Exodus 12:1-14 (33-36)

Some people love the darkness more than light,
and that is fitting when enslaved by day
but free for God and family at night.

In Egypt, Israel's twelve tribes would pray
and tell and retell tribal tales of old
and love light through the dark.

God saw and said,
"Prepare to leave. Pack clothes, pure dough and gold.
Soon I will strike all Egypt's first-born dead.
To be spared, take blood from a slaughtered lamb
and mark your doorjambs scarlet as a sign.

"This night each year recall the great I AM
and all I had to do to make you mine.
Passover you shall tell where this day led,
the day of sacrifice and unleavened bread."

II. Luke 22:7-14

The day of sacrifice and unleavened bread,
a thousand Passovers since Israel's first:
watch now the plot to strike God's first-born dead,
how greed and lust for power will do their worst.
The sacrificial lamb, the scattered flock,
the threat to progress toward the Promised Land—
we see it coming, hear the plotters' talk.
What way will God make now across the sand?

Jesus sent John and Peter to prepare:
“Look for a man who bears a water jar.
Follow him to his house and up the stair.”

The Way leads through that room, both hard and far.
It asks we suffer wilderness and cross.
That blood-marked room leads all to gain through loss.

III. John 13:1-8

That blood-marked room leads all to gain through loss.
Christ, having loved us, loves beyond death's end.
We pass through Jordan's pain, but once across
we reach the Promised Land where all wounds mend.
This room prepares us, makes us fed and clean
and one with God and Christ and one another
before we face the death that it will mean.

Here Jesus felt the grief of parting brother.
Loving those he would leave, he washed their feet.
He stripped down, tied a towel around his waist,
kneeled like a slave, scrubbed toes grimed by the street.

Peter said, "No, Lord, you will be disgraced,"
but had a change of heart when Jesus said,
"We can't be one till you are cleansed and fed."

IV. John 13:8-17

“We can’t be one till you are cleansed and fed—
not one with God, each other or creation.”

So Peter begged, “Then wash my hands and head,
not just my feet,” full of a wild elation,
as if he’d found the door to paradise,
pearl of great price, the treasure in the field,
forgetting all Christ taught of sacrifice,
as if one bath would leave him saved and healed,
as if this were the end of all he sought.

But grace bestowed by Christ is where we start.
“If I, your Teacher, wash your feet, you ought
to wash each other’s. Make my heart your heart,
and do what I have done: kneel like a slave.
What God will glorify is what you gave.”

V. John (12:35-36) 13:31-35

What God will glorify is what we gave
and how we served. In giving we receive,
and in receiving grace with power to save
we find a way beyond the graves we grieve.
Jesus, about to leave and go that way,
said, “Children, I am with you not much longer.
You’ll look for me, but here you have to stay.
I give you now these words to make you stronger,
this new commandment, that you love each other.
You’ll find me when you love as I love you,
welcoming, giving, serving one another,
and all will know The Way by what you do.”
He spoke of light, love, glory, yet his doom—
that coming night—now shadowed all with gloom.

VI. Matthew 26:20-25

The coming night now shadowed all with gloom—
a holy gloom, part aching love, part grief.
They knew tomorrow tensions would resume,
but here at first they felt a safe relief.
Jesus had challenged priests with his bold preaching
and shut the temple down by demonstration.
Could he be king, or was he overreaching?
The crowds were for him. Why the hesitation?

His mood that night was casting hope away,
and then all safety fell with one swift blade
as Jesus spoke the cleaving word, “betray,”
and, “Woe to him by whom God’s love’s betrayed,”
and worst—it would be one there sharing bread!
“Surely not I! Not I, Lord!” they all said.

VII. Matthew 26:31-35

“Surely not I! Not I, Lord,” they all said—
Judas, their trusted friend, among the rest—
all filling with confusion, shame and dread,
uncertain of themselves to face this test.

And who would not react with their dismay?
Look in your heart and see the weakness there.
Look at the small betrayals made each day,
trading Christ for some price. See and despair.

Then Jesus said, “All will desert tonight.”
Peter said, “No, not I!”

And Christ replied:
“Before the cock crows at this morning’s light,
three times you’ll have denied, denied, denied.”

“Though I must die with you, I won’t deny you!”

Compare what they did to what you and I do.

VIII. Mark 14:32-41

Compare what they did to what you and I do.

They left that sanctuary cleansed and fed,
made one by love of Christ,
then broke in two,
and came unraveled as each feared and fled.

First Judas fell to his love-killing task.
Then, in the Garden of Gethsemane,
Jesus took three aside and said, “I ask
only you stay awake. Keep watch for me.
Pray that you do not fail when you are tried.”
He went apart a while and then returned
and found them sleeping. “Could you not?” he cried.

And can we not, for all that we have learned?
Scattered like sheep, we lose the way we seek.
The spirit's willing but the flesh is weak.

IX. Luke 22:39-44

The spirit's willing but the flesh is weak,
and Jesus, too, was made of flesh and spirit.
He walked to where they would not hear him speak
of death to God, and would not see him fear it.
Then dropping to his knees in soft spring ground—
sweet smell of pomegranate blossom air,
breeze swaying full moon garden shadows round—
he sweat great drops like blood in his despair.
“Abba, remove this cup from me,” he prayed.
“I do not want to drink it. I’m your son!
I love this life.

Where are you?
I’m afraid.

Help me!

Yet not my will, but yours be done.”

At that, an angel suddenly appeared.
God sent him strength to face pain he still feared.

X. John 17

God sent him strength to face pain he still feared.
Surrender's peace surpasses understanding.
The swaying shadows calmed, confusion cleared.
He turned to meet what God's love was demanding.
He prayed for those he loved this parting prayer:
“Abba, the hour has come. May all I do
glorify you and show your sacred way,
so those who follow me will come to you
and knowing me, know you. Here they must stay,
to serve this world as I have. Make them one—
a sign of love to help the world believe
the way to you leads through your faithful Son.
May they find joy who for your sake will grieve—
your love and you and I found in their heart.
But now the hour's at hand. All falls apart.”

XI. from Matthew 26, Luke 22 and John 18

And now the hour's at hand. All falls apart.
Jesus comes back to rouse his sleeping friends,
“Get up. Your trials are about to start.
See, my betrayer is at hand.” He ends
and turns as Judas and the priests’ armed crowd
steal up, surrounding them, and with a kiss
Judas marks Jesus. Silence. Then with loud
clamor of swords men rush to bind his wrists,
and someone cuts off an attacker’s ear,
but Jesus yells, “No more! Who takes the sword
dies by the sword.” He calls the hurt man near
and one last time lifts hands, though bound by cord,
to touch with love and heal. All feel his power,
but he says, “Now the darkness has its hour.”

XII. Matthew 26:56b-27:26 & John 18:37

So now the force of darkness has its hour.
All the disciples scatter through the night.
The crowd leads Jesus under bough and flower
blackened by foul torch smoke, like killing blight.
Peter alone shadows them to the trial
where inside Jesus suffers lies and blows
and outside Peter swears his third denial
around the courtyard fire. The first cock crows.

At dawn the force of darkness does not give,
as Pilate draws from Christ his bold reply:
“To show the light of truth is why I live,”
which makes the darkness cry out, “Crucify!
Crucify! Crucify him!” Jesus stands,
willing to die for light at darkness’s hands.

XIII. Mark 15:16-20

Willing to die for light at darkness's hands,
willing to walk The Way of Truth to death,
willing to do whatever love demands,
willing to sacrifice flesh, blood and breath—
a hero's beauty halos him and shines
across the ages. Now we see and weep
as he walks down the soldier's mocking lines,
staggering from his grief and lack of sleep.
They drape him with a heavy purple cloak
and crown him with fierce thorns to see him bleed.
Two hundred of them kneel down as a joke,
then spit on him and whip him with a reed.
They strip him, lead him to be crucified,
and think they've heard the end when he has died.

XIV. John 1:1-5, 10-14; 3:19

They think they've heard the end when he has died,
as if God's Word lies silenced by the tomb,
the light that gave all life, snuffed out inside.
But birth, not death, comes through God's blood-marked room.
The Word's reborn each time we tell the story,
Christ's candle relit by our loving hands.
His Way lives on—our serving is his glory.
What dark can't comprehend, faith understands.
Yet resurrected love still struggles here.
A shadow line divides each heart, my heart,
your heart, and on the dark side lurk the fear
and greed and pride that tear our world apart.
And that is why grief haunts this room tonight.
Some people love the darkness more than light.