



**Mennonite  
Church**  
Canada

Resource Centre

# From our Churches

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## Welcome & Prayer

Good evening! Welcome to our Maundy Thursday Service. As you know, tonight's service is quite different than a common worship service. It is a service that centres around the sensory and the emotional experiences of that fateful night in history. When researching the events of this night, I drew heavily on Middle Eastern Jewish and Christian scholars.

With the aid of this historical information, and through the reading of a few scriptures, singing of hymns, prayer and the retelling of the well-known story, we will try to imagine that night just as it was. It was a night full of lies, fear, denial, injustice and abandonment. It was a night where Jesus got no sleep. Our hope this evening is that we will come to a greater realization of the immense sacrifice Jesus made by offering up his life for us. We hope that we will be moved to trust God more fully with our lives as well.

Let us begin with prayer.

## Prayer

Most Holy God, we confess our faith in Jesus Christ,  
Who, being divine, did not cling to his equality with You,  
but humbled himself as a servant,  
and became obedient to death -  
even death on a cross.

We confess that we often forget the greatness of this sacrifice.  
We are a thirsty people.  
We come tonight in humility and reverence.  
Help us understand the profound meaning of the cross  
so that we can be raised to new life, and drink the living water. AMEN

**Hymn** # 254 HWB vs. 1-3            "Ah Holy Jesus"

## Part I

**Scripture Reading** - Mark 9:33-37; Luke 22:24-27

Last Sunday morning we celebrated Palm Sunday, also known as Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. According to Jewish predictions, the Messiah was to establish the Kingdom of God from Jerusalem. You will recall that his entry into the city was different than the Messianic predictions. He rode a donkey symbolizing the peaceable kingdom that he was bringing. He didn't march into Roman headquarters as some thought the Messiah would do; instead he cleansed the temple.

You will recall that he also went to Bethany for each night. From Monday through Thursday, Jesus came into the city teaching in the temple, addressing the crowds and healing the sick. But every night he went and hid in the Mount of Olives before returning to Bethany.

Jesus' disciples were almost always with him. An interesting situation had been brewing among them for a long time - and it was coming down to an outright confrontation. "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" We wonder what the big deal was. In Jesus' time, greatness affected your place in society.

Take, for example, eating a meal. Paintings like Leonardo Da Vinci's "The Last Supper," give us the wrong impression of social custom at the time. That painting reflects practices in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe, not how it actually was in Palestine many centuries earlier.

The table was only inches off the ground, as is demonstrated here. People then reclined around the table, lying on their left side, eating with their right hand. The table was set up in this U formation so that when the servant brought the food to the table, everyone could be served from the centre. The servant would not have to worry about tripping over someone's legs.

From Da Vinci's painting, we may also think that Jesus sat in the middle at the back. This most likely was not the case. The way society was set up, as I mentioned earlier, "greatness" was very noticeable - especially at a big meal. As we know from the Scriptures, Jesus was the host of the meal. This means he would have occupied the traditional host's spot at the table (1). The host's guests would then be arranged around the table in order of their importance to the host. When the disciples were arguing about the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, they were wondering where each would be reclining during this very important meal.

And when it came time for the meal, you'll never guess who sat at the place of the honoured guest.

**Hymn # 530** "What Wondrous Love is This" vs. 1-2

## **PART II**

### **Scripture Reading - Matthew 26:17-30**

It is Thursday evening, the day *before* the Passover. Jesus wanted to celebrate the Passover with his disciples before his arrest so he decided to do it early.

As you will recall the first Passover feast was held in Egypt - when the angel of death passed over the people. Those who did not have the blood of the lamb on the doorpost woke up to the death of the eldest son in the family. The Passover meal was celebrated every year since that day. The biggest celebration was held in Jerusalem. Everyone living within a 20 mile radius of the city would attend the feast. Many others also journeyed for days to get there - for some it was the pilgrimage of a lifetime. Jerusalem and the surrounding area were packed with people.

Jesus held the Passover feast with his disciples 24 hours early. He borrowed a room from an acquaintance. The arrangements would have been secretive since it was a criminal offence to harbour a wanted man. At the meal, none of the four gospels mention the lamb - one of the central foods of the Passover. They speak only of the unleavened bread, the bowl of food it was dipped into and the wine. Jesus did not want to bring a lamb to the temple for ritual slaughtering because it was the priests themselves who wanted to arrest him.

In those days, criminals had no rights – no priest would have slaughtered Jesus' lamb. But more importantly, Jesus was seen as the lamb that was to be slain at the Passover.

When it came time to prepare the Passover meal, Luke says that Jesus sent **Peter and John** to prepare the room and the meal. Just before 6:00pm, the traditional time for the meal, Jesus and the other disciples arrived at the room. The disciples started to take their places. The place of highest

honour was the spot at the front-left corner of the table (2). The place of second highest honour was two places down from that (3). And so went the order of importance around the table with the least important guest sitting at the corner at the far end.

The gospel of Luke tells us that Peter and John were arguing about being the greatest - over who was going to get the spot at the front-left. The disciples knew that Peter, James and John had a closer relationship with Jesus, so they began to take their places around the table, farther down - in the order that they thought Jesus would want.

It is presumed that Peter and John were watching everyone take their places as they were busy preparing the meal. Jesus took his place as the host. Now the gospel of John (13:23) tells us that John was reclining so that Jesus' back was to his chest - that means that John was at the place of second highest honour (3), third from the front-left. That seemed appropriate. But who was the honoured guest? If James and John were already in their places behind Jesus, it must mean that it was Peter.

There are two indications that the person in the place of highest honour was not Peter. During the meal Jesus was talking about his betrayal, "It is the one whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." In Jewish history, it is common that the host would show hospitality in several forms. One form was called the "Offering of the Sop". In this practice, the host would dip a piece of bread into a dish of food and scoop up some of it and then would put it into the mouth of the guest. This practice is only extended to the most honoured guest.

And we know from the Scriptures that when Jesus dipped into the dish, he gave it to Judas. This means, Judas was seated at the place of highest honour. It is also recorded in the Scriptures that Jesus and Judas were close enough together to be sharing the same bowl. How could Judas be at the seat of honour? Peter, like us, was confused.

We presume that Peter had witnessed John being seated beside Jesus, and Judas being seated at the place of honour. It is thought that Peter, in his stubbornness, will have made a fuss before reclining at the place of lowest honour. In some cases this type of act was done to insult the host. Invariably, the host would see the error and shuffle the seating to accommodate the person with hurt feelings. But, in this case, we believe, Jesus must have left Peter there. Likewise, Peter must have been seated in a place that could get John's attention to motion for him to ask Jesus who his betrayer would be. Seat 4 and seat 3 would be in direct eye contact. Finally, had the owner of the facility been present, that person would have washed each person's feet in the absence of a hired servant. Since the owner wasn't there, the job would automatically have fallen to the person in the position of lowest honour. For some reason that did not happen, and we know that Jesus got up to wash their feet. The text says, "and then he came to Peter." Some translations read, "he came at last to Peter," probably meaning that Peter was at the end, since the foot-washing always went from most important to least important.

You will recall then, that Peter objected to Jesus doing this - maybe there are feelings of guilt settling in by now.. But when Jesus said that he would have no part of him unless he accepted this, Peter humbled himself and asked "Lord, then not my feet only, but also my hands and my head."

## **Footwashing**

We want to take opportunity ourselves to observe the practice of foot-washing. You do not have to do this if you are not comfortable with the practice. There are several stations set up on the other side of this room. Simply choose a partner, take turns using the pitcher to pour water over the other persons feet. There are towels there to dry off.

We will be singing a few hymns during this time. Those who choose to remain in here may use this then as a time of reflection.

**Hymns - #250, 258, 257 HWB**

### **Part III**

After the foot-washing was complete, the meal began. The Passover meal had a certain routine to it. Certain phrases were spoken at certain times, and foods were eaten in the proper order. It is believed that Jesus took the first cup and pronounced the traditional blessing.

Jesus added something new. "Take, this, and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes."

Then the first course began. The first things to be eaten were some of the greens and bitter herbs (mostly onions, garlic, radishes and peppers). This food represented the cruel bondage of the Israelites in Egypt. It is interesting that during the eating of the bitter herbs, it comes out that Judas is the betrayer. "Surely not I", he said. "You have said so," replied Jesus. Judas leaves the meal - his communion is over.

After the bitter herbs comes the second cup of wine. Jesus pronounced the proper liturgy and they drank together. Then Jesus took the Passover bread and spoke the Aramaic formula: "This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let everyone who hungers come and eat; let everyone who is needy come and eat the Passover meal." Then, creating something new, Jesus added his own words, "Take, eat, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Then the lamb was served, but in their case was substituted for roast kid, cereals, fish or eggs (that were becoming common during that time.)

After the meat (or eggs) they observed the third cup. Jesus raised this cup of blessing and spoke the principal table grace, as was the custom. "May the All-merciful make us worthy of the days of the Messiah and of the life of the world to come. He brings salvation of his king. He shows loving kindness to his anointed, to David, and to his seed in all eternity. He makes peace in his heavenly places. May he make peace for us and for all Israel. And say ye Amen." The disciples reply with an "amen." Then Jesus held up the cup and again breaking with tradition added, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me."

Often people reclined for hours after the meal and the fourth cup was consumed during that time. But the Bible says that when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. The fourth cup had not been touched.

**Hymn # 241 HWB - "Tis Midnight and on Olive's Brow....**

### **Part IV**

Jesus entered the garden of Gethsemane at the Mount of Olives. The word Gethsemane means "oil press" - it probably got its name from the oil press that was on that part of the estate. The scriptures tell us that Jesus was very grieved and agitated. He took Peter, James, and John a little farther into the garden and asked them to stay awake with him as he prayed. In a common expression of grief, Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed. "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want, but what you want." For the longest time, I wondered what "cup" he was referring to. We know now that he was talking about the fourth cup - the one they did not consume at the table. You see, the four cups were symbolic of the four phrases of redemption found in Exodus 6. The fourth cup was the cup of suffering. It represented the end of the meal. Each Passover ended knowing that they as a people still suffered. Here Jesus sees this as the cup that is going to fulfill the Passover - he sees the cup as death. And in the garden he is praying to escape the fourth cup.

Jesus keeps praying. Periodically, he goes back to check on his disciples. It seems that he asks them a common question, but it was a question that also had meaning. He came back and found them asleep. He said to them, "Are you sleeping?" I mentioned earlier that people would often stay at the table and talk for hours. Traditionally the meal ended when the first person at the table fell asleep.

Jesus has been speaking and praying about the fourth cup, but he realizes now that communion with his disciples is over, since they have fallen asleep.

Finally, the hour had come, "Satan's hour." Along came Judas with the temple police and auxiliary police - they had a warrant for the arrest from the Sanhedrin. The arresting party did not know Jesus. It was customary for the disciples to greet their Rabbi with a kiss, so Judas made that the sign. Jesus was taken away.

There is evidence that the timing of the arrest was planned precisely. Immediately after Jesus' arrest, he was taken to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing body, for questioning. When Jesus arrived members of the Sanhedrin were in place. The Sanhedrin was composed of the High Priest, the "elders" (the most influential families in Jerusalem, and seem to have been primarily wealthy land owners). The third group, the representatives of the scribes, consisted primarily of lawyers drawn from the middle classes who tended to be Pharisaic in their convictions.

These 70 persons sat in a semi-circle on elevated seating so that they could all see each other. At the open end of the group stood two court clerks who recorded the minutes of the proceedings, while a seat for the accused was placed in the centre between the two clerks, Chief Priests, the Elders and the Scribes. (MARK on floor)

We might wonder what the Sanhedrin was doing since it was Rome that governed and exercised justice. The Sanhedrin was the legal body of the Jewish people in Jerusalem. They had a lot of power. Though they were only allowed to punish "religious crimes," they could take that punishment as far as capital punishment.

It was highly unusual for the Sanhedrin to be meeting in the evening. In fact, the only time they ever met in the evening was when an offense was so serious that capital punishment needed to be carried out as soon as possible. We know that Peter followed Jesus into the courtyard where the temple guards were sitting. There is an interesting fact that surrounds Peter's denial as well. When Jesus told Peter that Peter would also deny him like the other disciples did - he actually told him what time it would happen.

As we might imagine, in those days it was very difficult to tell time at night. The most accurate way of telling time was when the roosters crowed. A twelve year study shows that roosters crow in Jerusalem at 3 distinct times - everybody knew this. People would set times for beginning journey's by the first, second or third crowing. The roosters usually crowed at 12:30 p.m., 1:30 a.m. and 2:30 a.m. Obviously the arrest happened before midnight. Jesus said to Peter, "Before the rooster crows you will deny me three times." In our language it is the same as saying, "Peter, by the middle of the night, you will have denied me three times."

The proceedings inside the court begin with the questioning of the witnesses - they obviously knew the arrest was coming as well, because they had been called in. In capital punishment cases the testimonies between two witnesses had to totally agree or else both testimonies were discounted. We might wonder why this was a capital punishment case. What did Jesus do? In Mark the charge is recorded that he said he would "destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days." In Greco-Roman culture, destroying a temple is a capital offence. But obviously they were misunderstanding him. But the witnesses gave their testimonies in the presence of everyone. But as you will recall from Scripture, none of the testimonies agreed.

Meanwhile outside, Peter had made it all the way into the courtyard of the High Priest. Normally the courtyard was empty at night, but these guards had to work late since the Sanhedrin was in session. By now he had denied Jesus twice already. Then a cousin of the man whose ear Peter had cut off with his sword said to Peter, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" Peter denied it and at that moment the rooster crowed. Jesus, who could see Peter out in the courtyard turned to him. Then Peter remembered Jesus' words and went out and wept bitterly.

Since none of the testimonies agreed, Caiaphas, the revered High Priest took over. Caiaphas was very powerful. The average term of office for a High Priest was four years - he had been in for 19 already. When the High Priest began to interrogate, the accused was required by law to answer. At first Jesus refused. Caiaphas knew that the only person who could speak about tearing down the temple and rebuilding it in three days was the coming Messiah. Since he wanted a verdict so badly,

Caiaphas asked him directly, “Are you the Messiah?” Up until this point Jesus had been able to keep his Messiahship a secret. Now it was either a “yes” or a “no”. Jesus, knowing he would die for it said, “I am,” and gives further explanation from Psalm 100:1 and Daniel 7:13. At last Caiaphas got the blasphemy charge he wanted and he tore his clothes in a common expression of rage. The death sentence was pronounced.

Then Mark’s gospel tells us that they blindfolded him and subjected him to a peculiar form of mockery. Rabbinic tradition (a take off from Isaiah 11:2-4) held that the Messiah would judge with the strongest of human senses - that sense is smell. So they blindfolded him and said, “Prophesy” - in other words, smell my clothes and then say my name. But again we know that Jesus refused to speak.

By this time, it was almost daybreak. Pilate held his court cases at dawn. It took all night to get a verdict. It was now Friday morning. Now all they had to do was convince Pilate to execute him. They planned to introduce Jesus as one who calls himself “King of the Jews” (not Messiah) hoping Pilate would see him then as a leader of a resistance movement.

Even so, it would not be easy to convince Pilate, since Romans were always reluctant to kill someone who wouldn’t defend himself. In the end Pilate decided to try to free Jesus by offering a good will release. Barrabas, who was probably a Zealot, an extremist was put beside Jesus and the crowd was given an option.

It appears that some strategically placed members of the Sanhedrin manipulated the crowd and before long, Jesus was off to be scourged and then to the cross at Golgatha - a decision that Pilate was not comfortable with.

## **Conclusion**

When we reflect on this evening, I am sure there are a lot of things that we are not comfortable with. Many questions about God’s faithfulness, Jesus’ question about the cup of suffering. Questions that are hard to answer. Questions that we may not be able to answer, but questions that I hope lead us to deeper levels of faith. I hope above all that this evening has made the fears, the sufferings and the betrayals more real to you. And that we can realize with profound humility what was accomplished for humankind on the cross.

Feel free to sit in this room and contemplate the events. Get up to leave when you feel like it. Go thinking about the events of the night. If you wish to stay behind for an informal discussion of Mel Gibson’s portrayal of these events, please feel free to do that. .

## **Prayer**

Dear Lord,  
Who was the guilty?  
It certainly was not you.  
Who brought this night of horror upon you?  
It certainly was not you.  
Who deserved to be treated this way?  
Certainly not you.  
Then who was it Lord?  
Lord, it was me and others like me.  
Peter, and the other disciples were no different  
than I am, that we are.  
Yet, you still came that we may have salvation.  
Even if we tried a whole lifetime,  
we cannot repay you for this.  
Look with compassion upon us.  
Protect us, even though on this night  
you had no protection. AMEN

**Hymn** #240 HWB - “Go to Dark Gethsemane”