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“In the Night When He Was Betrayed”: A Sermon*

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For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:23–26; RSV).

WE ARE GATHERED TOGETHER in this old cathedral: the local church with its congregation, with the bishop and the pastors of this diocese—and the universal Church from all over the world. We are assisting at the installation of three new deans of this diocese; we are celebrating the Holy Communion according to the liturgy of the Church of Denmark.

Many different traditions are gathered here. We know how deeply we are imbued with the tradition to which we belong—in our thoughts, in our hearts and minds, from our external behaviour to the depths of our subconsciousness. We are often frightened by the depth of all our differences, and sometimes a depressing question arises in our hearts: Are we running in vain? Are we condemned to frustration? Are not these traditions too tough, too deep, too subtle?

Dear friends! We have heard the word of the apostle Paul. A voice from the very beginning of Christendom sounds to us. Listening to it, we try to find an answer to our puzzling question.

“*I receive from the Lord what I also delivered to you.*” This phrase indicates that something exceedingly important follows. Paul has not himself invented something which he is now communicating to the Corinthians with apostolic authority. It is much more than that. A little later in the same letter to the Corinthians he uses the same words: “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received” (1 Cor. 15:3). The words “receive” and “deliver” are of the language of tradition. The importance of the tradition to which Paul here bears witness is strongly emphasized by the words, “I received *from the Lord.*” The exact meaning of this expression is not quite clear, but at any rate it means: What follows is of the highest possible importance. Its origin is not from the old apostles, or from Paul, or from any other human being, or from a council, or from a decisive

*Preached in the Cathedral at Aarhus, Denmark, on 26 August 1964, at a service attended by the Diocesan Synod of Aarhus and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

turning-point in the history of the Church. It is from the Lord himself. Other things which Paul has delivered to the Corinthians, other traditions, may have been good and important, but *this* tradition is from the risen Lord himself. Listen, therefore, to these words with all your heart and with all your mind. Both you and I, says Paul, are under the highest possible authority.

What is the content of this receiving and delivering? First, a very important and very precise indication of time. "*In the night when he was betrayed.*" There are nights of calm and serene peace, nights of fruitful unrest, of clarifying inspiration, nights of creative endeavour for genuine human achievements; but here is the night of *betrayal*, of evil darkness, of treachery. "Judas drew near to kiss him" (Luke 22:47). They all—the whole college of apostles—ran away and left him completely alone. They delivered him. And his enemies stood ready to "receive" what was "delivered" to them. Paul uses the same Greek word for both actions: the delivering over of the gospel and the delivering over of our Lord to death. These two acts of delivering over intersect and this intersection is cruciform.

It was a night of terrible *division*. Luke records: "A dispute also arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest" (Luke 22:24).

It was the night of satanic *temptation*. Jesus said: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat" (Luke 22:31).

It was the night of security of *presumptuous* faith. "Peter said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death'" (Luke 22:33).

It was the night of *denial*. Jesus said: "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you three times deny that you know me" (Luke 22:34).

It was the night of *agony*. "And being in an agony, Jesus prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground" (Luke 22:44).

And the night became day, but the day was only darker than the night. Mark records: "At the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last" (Mark 15:34, 37). The day ended in hopeless darkness, darker than the darkness of the night. Such was this night and such was this day.

And in the midst of this night of betrayal, of division, of temptation, of presumption and of denial, of agony, was Jesus. He talked to them all—to the traitor, to the disputing disciples, to the tempted and to the presumptuous, and to him who denied him. Each of them heard his words in this night of betrayal. But he did not only *talk* to them. He also did something.

"The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed *took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body for you,' And in the same way also the cup*"—as we read it in the lesson. In this

night he took bread from their common meal and he took a cup of common wine, and he said: "My body for you," or, as other ancient authorities read, "broken for you"; and likewise: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood."

This action and these words were his answer to them all: to the traitor, to the disputing, the tempted, the presumptuous, the denier, the sleeping, the executioners—*to them all*. It seemed very little, yet it was all. It was the expression of his existence as an existence exclusively for them and with them. And therefore: "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" "Do take bread, do give thanks, do give the bread and the cup to each other. Do eat, do drink, my body, my blood. Do this in order that this night of betrayal, of division and disputing, of temptation, of presumption and denial, should never be forgotten, but be a real presence. Do this in order that you shall never forget me. I say to you: I will really be a presence among you." And they did it in obedience to him.

"As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." That is, when you re-enact what I received and what I delivered to you, you declare for yourself and for the whole world that your only Lord is Jesus, who was betrayed, who was in agony, who gave his body and shed his blood. When you do this, you declare and confess that there is no other lordship on earth than the Lordship of Jesus, who died in this night of infinite darkness. He is our risen and exalted Lord. The resurrection of Jesus means that this man in his death and in his unspeakable weakness and abandonment, "delivered" to death and "received" by death as miserable, unmasked religious prophet and false messiah—that this man is raised from death as our living Saviour and Lord. This is the stumbling-block and folly for us all, for the world as well as for the Church. But, says Paul, this weakness is stronger than men (1 Cor. 1:25).

Do this—and thereby you declare that this night of betrayal and death is the night of life and victory, of a new creation, of light and of hope. In this night there is the mystery of evil, darkness and terrible depths without end, and in this night there is—at the same time—the mystery of love and mercy without end; in this night of defeat is the mystery of victory and new life.

"Until he comes." Until he comes, we are still in the night in which he was betrayed—because the risen Lord is in all those on earth who are betrayed, in those we are betraying, whose existence is in the uttermost darkness, in the poor, the despised, offended and overlooked, in the starving and suffering, who are crying for their rights and are heard by no one. He is still betrayed, in the nights of our division, when we dispute which of us is to be regarded as the greatest. We cannot stop at the word "greatest." We must try to translate it into our situation, so that we all may understand what it means. "A dispute arose among us, which of us should be regarded as the oldest, or the fullest, or the most accurate in theological formulation,

most eager for pure doctrine, or the most sensitively open to culture or the most genuine in piety." We are still in the night.

But, in this night there is the Lord Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord. This is the mystery of the Church, until he comes. And as at that time, he talks to us all, to the betraying, to the disputing, the sleeping, the presumptuous and denying, and to all in agony. His word is in our midst, on our lips and in our heart—that is, the word of faith, which we preach, as Paul says in the Epistle to the Romans (Rom. 10:8).

His word shall be proclaimed in our night. And, moreover, we shall do what he commanded his disciples to do. Let us once more return to our text. We have received it from the Lord and we deliver it to all men: In this night of betrayal, of division, of temptation, and of agony—in this very night he takes bread, he gives thanks, he breaks, he gives it us, saying, "This is my body, broken for you," and in the same way the cup, "My blood, shed for you." This is his answer to us all: Do this in remembrance of me, and thus be my Church on earth in the night, until I come in my glory.

We heard the question: Are we running in vain? Are not our traditions too deep, too tough? We have now heard the answer: The Lord Jesus is among us—in the midst of our division. He does not wait to be among us until our divisions have been ended. *He is our risen Lord.*

He alone gives us faith and hope in the night. *He is our unity*, in the midst of our divisions. In his name we shall go out and do our work—in this local church and in the churches all over the world. In his name we shall also do our work for the unity of his Church on earth. His name be blessed to all eternity. Amen.