

“Ye shall take hyssop and dip it in the blood and strike the lintel and two side posts with the blood; and none of you shall go out at the door of his house until morning.”

Perhaps it seems strange to you that on the night we recall the setting free of God’s people to worship him together in liberty, we celebrate the first Mass of the Triduum in *isolation* and enclosed in our homes. But in fact the rite that releases Israel to their renewed status as God’s firstborn - the sacred ceremonies of Passover and Eucharist that were instituted *behind* closed doors and around kitchen tables - were not just shaped by circumstance - they were designed to reflect, as we will consider, both the inconceivable liberty, and the incomprehensible self-restraint, that are the essence of Love itself, and the ground of *all being*. And those rites which we celebrate in this feast, make it clear that, in the chosen obedience, that deliberately contrasts Adam’s transgression, lies not greater limitation or confinement, but that exodus, that movement, which finally leads us *beyond* the finite, and into God’s own *boundless* life - so that here we find ordinary tables made altars of the most high, ordinary people become sacred servants of the living God, an ordinary human body becoming the container of all things, and the door through which all might pass into the Divine Nature.

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In the name of the Father....

So, the inconceivable liberty, and the incomprehensible self-restraint that are the essence of Love itself...

If you had to *describe* love to someone - how would you do it?

What you are no doubt thinking is right, of course - to comprehend love at all it must be embodied - sensory - an action not mere words. We are acutely conscious in our current circumstance of the limitation of speech and sight alone in the communication of love, but if you had to put it *just* into words?

Well, obviously you would need quite a few. Let me count the ways Shakespeare said, of loving just one person, but what of love itself - how much data might be required to transmit even the blurry outline of it?

A whole long list of properties would emerge, I’m sure, as you felt your way around or towards some of the unmappable contours of love. But as you composed your list, which would be first? The first word.

Or perhaps another question would be no more difficult. If you were giving an account of the whole of creation - and you knew that somewhere in it there must be a first word. A first speech act. What would *that* be?

Or again, if you were yourself a perfect relationship of limitless capacity and wanted to embody love, and you knew that to do it you would require the entire history of all the (almost endless) diversity of a created order, gathered up in the wilful actions, and in the speech, of one creature within it. What would that look and feel and sound like - what would that action, that word, that quality be which summed up the whole, and brought that great expression of love to its right conclusion?

In one sense, to all these vast questions the whole counsel of Holy Scripture offers just one answer, the one laid out under several of its aspects in our readings this evening, and celebrated in that which was instituted on this night.

When St Paul set about answering the first question at the beginning of our Lenten journey, and tried to use just words - he chose a word to begin *his* list of Love's definitive qualities - perhaps *surprising to us* - which is the *heart* of that one answer, as it is the heartbeat of this great week, of this feast, and of our faith.

Love he said. First. Love is Patient.

Patience is what undergirds the whole project of creation.

Patience is what characterises the one in whom that creation is fulfilled.

And patience, as the Bishop spelled out on Passion Sunday, as the Collect for Holy Week makes clear, is what Christ supremely demonstrates in our gospels this week, on this night, and in the darkness of the day that follows it above all, what he calls us, above all, to imitate, not just in our current crisis, but in all lives as disciples.

It is this that is manifest most simply, and mandated most clearly, in the traditional Holy Thursday washing of feet we mark by its absence today, it is this that is carried like phylacteries, in the maniple towels over the forearms of deacons and priests and Bishops at mass - this that is the basis of all Christian ministry - of all true human vocation - this that we must learn to hear if we are to tarry even one hour - the *call* to share in the patience of Jesus - to wait...

In Roberto Benigni's film *La Vita Bella* as the hero begins his training in the noble *profession* of waiting on tables, his elderly mentor Eliseo tells his young apprentice:

Serving is the supreme art. God is first among waiters. He serves men. Though He is not their servant.

Now, although the second part of that claim seems to contradict the idea that runs from Palm Sunday's Epistle, through the usual Maundy Thursday ceremonies to the cross itself - God in Christ taking the very nature of a servant - the subtle distinction the old waiter is expressing is one woven throughout the scriptural revelation of the Son of God. It is apparent through all the Gospel interactions of this week, through his encounters with Caiaphas and Pilate, with his disciples and with his Father. It is a distinction that our language is ill equipped to describe, but it is the essence of patience, and one we must learn to recognise if we are going to share in the patience of Jesus...

In grammar the patient is the term used in the theory of meaning-structure-relations that identifies something affected or acted upon by the verb. Like the medical patient being cared *for*, dependent upon, ultimately operated upon, by another - patient implies passivity not activity. The object not the subject.

But what we encounter in the Word made, or better become, Flesh, is not passivity in that sense, it is a continually chosen and held position - like that expressed in Gethsemane - an active, willed passivity which subjects itself to the will, or simply to the reality, of another, rather than seeking to struggle or overcome. It is chosen submission out of love. A making room.

When we talk about being patient we often mean something like bearing or putting up with, but that is the attitude of a servant, not of one who serves - patience is more dynamic than that. It is a choosing not to act when we might do so. Not to leave when we might prefer to. Not to seek to enforce a change, but to live wholeheartedly *with* something not of us.

This is the patience that carries with a dying person when the life within us is longing to run, or to give up before time.

This is the patience that every nurse worth their salt shares in every day *for* their salt, not just in crisis but in every shift of their working lives, the patience required of every parent or carer, or waiter for that matter - the stilling of their own need to look for the needs of someone else, waiting - alert - to act for them.

And, this is the gracious patience that spoke creation into being in the first place, the first word, not so much an action, but a verb, a willed making of space for the other - let there be...that which is not us.

It is this very patience our Lord displays gratuitously, in taking upon himself our nature, in taking up his towel and in kneeling...

The patience that pays attention to the other, that waits upon them rather than dictates to them, that allows them in their turn to freely choose to serve, precisely by giving them the gift of being served.

This kind of patience though - this very particular form of chosen passivity - also carries an inevitable suffering within it. Patience as *in Passio*. Inevitable because it depends on a giving away of ego - not my will but thine be done - because preferring the other and dying to self are to some degree inseparable.

And inevitable because the people we might serve are not necessarily perfectly responsive, not always perfectly tuned to being equally self-giving in return, not even necessarily very good at being sufficiently patient to receive the loving kindness we seek to extend to them - because of immaturity, because of selfishness, because they are not yet finished.

So being patient after the example of Christ always involves drinking a cup we would rather not drink, and we *need* to learn to recognise by taste those moments when we are being invited into the holy mystery of his patience. But we are not called to take this task upon ourselves, rather to *share* in the (long) patience of the one, who in the act of creating that which is by definition not perfect, always knew that there would be in what emerged - wine *and* gall, a cup of judgement and bitter tears - and was always willing to drink it to the dregs. Because that is what love consists in.

When St Paul was choosing his list of words for love, of course, he cheated. And rather than use adjectives which are too static, he only employed verbs. Love is doing kindness, hoping all things... And the first word patient derives from a word for sacrifice, and means most fully - putting one's whole breath and blood into something across an extended time.

Or as Henri Nouwen put it: The word patience means the willingness to stay, and live the situation out to the full, in the belief that something hidden there will be made manifest.

It is patience that suffers to see emerge that which it knows to be present.

Long suffering not out of *inert submission* to circumstance, but conscious *living* of it to the full out of love; not grudgingly choosing the lesser of two evils but willingly choosing something we do not want for the love of the one who does, not a 'putting up with' out of some under-developed sense of how loved we are, but enduring in the light of the hope love reveals, the unhurried urgency of faith in what will ultimately come to be.

This is the patience we are called to imitate and enter into. This is the love that bears up the entire created order; that is summed up, within it, in the cross, and in the life of servanthood - of waiting - that is it's daily outworking. This might be the watchword for what is being asked of us now, in the mundane domestic tasks of our newly limited lives, in the willing self-restraint of staying at home, but it is the first and last word - the patience that dares to allow and absorb the groaning of the whole Cosmos, so that what is hidden in the *original* choice to embody the infinite love of the Triune God, might in the fullness of time, be perfectly revealed.

The long passion of God that purposed, “Let us make man in our own image”. The long passion of God that, when Jesus had received the bitter wine, said: “It is accomplished.”