

Sandbags in The Upper Room

John 13:1-35; Mark 4:12-16

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The history of the world has been drastically altered by events which took place in two small rooms, separated by thousands of miles and by hundred of years. The first of these rooms can be found in a drab flat over a dingy laundry somewhere in the Soho district of London. You peer through the dirty, curtain less window and you see a small round table piled with a strange conglomeration of articles; a heap of scattered ashes, a teacup with a broken handle, a child's toy, some odds and ends from a woman's work-basket. Seated at the table, writing with a passionate intensity, is a man. The lamp above his head seems to etch even deeper the dark, harsh lines in his face. He has fierce, jutting eyebrows and a black, bushy beard. He writes late into the night, the only sound in the room the scratching of the cheap pen in his hand. His name is Karl Marx, and the book, which he is writing is called *Das Kapital*, a book that has indeed changed the history of whole nations and which, in the belief of modern Communists, would revolutionize the world.

The second of these "upper rooms" can be found in one of the oldest cities in the world—Jerusalem. It, too, is centered around a table, a long table carefully laid with bread and wine, common food, the ingredients of a supper. Seated at the table, partaking of this meal are thirteen men. One of them, obviously the host, performs an unusual ceremony with the bread and wine, after which he speaks at great length to the others as though to comfort and admonish and fortify them against impending events which have charged the atmosphere with gloom. His name is Jesus; and the words that he spoke that night have changed the lives of millions of people; and in the belief of Christians today it is his gospel of love and brotherhood and service, not the Marxist doctrine of strife and duplicity that will revolutionize the world.

The modern pilgrim, who visits the city of Jerusalem, as Mrs. Taylor and I did in 1965, will be shown an upper chamber known as the Cenaculum, which reputedly stands on the site of the original Upper Room. It was in the Israeli sector of the ancient city located on the height of Mt. Zion when we were there, and it forms part of a Franciscan church—The church of the Dormitian—which adjoins the Tomb of King David venerated by the Jews. There is every reason to

suppose that the Cenaculum is one of the most authentic sites in Jerusalem. The succession of Christian Churches built on this site, and going back to at least A.D. 135, has preserved its sanctity as the place where some of the most important events in Gospel history took place.

The most impressive feature of the Cenaculum is its sheer simplicity. One reaches it by mounting an outer stone staircase, walking along a balcony and stooping through a narrow door. There are no adornments in the room, no ecclesiastical appointments, nothing to distinguish it as the most sacred Christian shrine in all the world—the holy of holies of our faith. It is a comparatively large, empty, perfectly plain room, the ceiling arched and supported by pillars, and with a simple bronze tablet on one wall. To stand in this room and read from the New Testament and lead a party of pilgrims in prayer is a profound religious experience. One's imagination easily crosses the centuries and recreates a scene, old but ever new, and in the cool, hushed atmosphere one feels the unmistakable presence of Christ.

The significance of the Upper Room stands out for us in three things: All four gospels record at some length the events and teachings that took place there (Mt. 26, Mark 14, Luke 22). The Gospel of John, despite its brevity of only 21 chapters, sets five complete chapters and part of a sixth against the background of the Upper Room (John 13-17).

Some of the most decisive events in the drama of the early church took place here. Historically the Upper Room derives its principal importance as the scene of our Lord's final meeting with his disciples on the night before his crucifixion. Jesus and the disciples approached the city of Jerusalem from the town of Bethany on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. They cross the crest of the Mount and descend into the valley below where they cross the Brook Cedron. They go up the slope to the Gate Beautiful and enter the city. They walk through the ancient, narrow streets of the old city until they reach Mount Zion, where the two sent on ahead have made ready for their coming. Luke and John say they kept the Passover feast in the "Upper Room" of that house. Jesus exploded a bombshell in their midst that night, when he said one of them would betray him. Each one began to ask, "Lord, is it I?" Later Judas departs and the John says, "It was night" (John 13:30). The Lord knew that it would be the last time he would be with his disciples before his death. He felt the very shadow of death falling upon him. He did not speak of the cost to himself of what was about to happen, nor did he exact from them any vow of service. He did something better. He took a towel and girded himself and washed their feet. He, their Lord and Master, performed the duty of a slave, and by so doing shamed them for quarreling about position and power (Luke 22:24-27). Then all the passion of Jesus' heart was expressed in the institution of the Lord's Supper. Jesus took a loaf of bread, gave thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood’. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me” (I Cor. 11:24, 25).

The story of the Upper Room was not finished when the Master rose from the table and led His friends out to Gethsemane; it was not finished when the candles were extinguished that night and silence reigned again. For when after Calvary the broken-hearted, leaderless disciples sought a hiding place and refuge from the threatening mob, it was in this same Upper Room that they found it.

This was the place which witnessed their hopeless mourning for the Master they had lost, and this was the place where that mourning was turned to bewildered, incredulous joy, when Jesus came back to them through the closed and bolted door, and revealed himself risen and alive (John 20:19).

John also tells of a second resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples in the Upper Room. One of their number, Thomas, had been absent on the evening of Easter Day. When the others told him ecstatically that they had seen the risen Christ—he refused to believe them—not, as is sometimes supposed, because he had a naturally skeptical mind, but more probably because he was overcome with grief. “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Eight days later the risen Christ came again to the Upper Room and showed Thomas the proof he desired. In abject humility Thomas fell at Jesus’ feet and cried out, “My Lord and My God!”

The third reason for the significance of the Upper Room is seen in the fact that some of the grandest words in the New Testament were spoken there. Here we truly stand on Holy Ground. We see the Master and his men reclining at the Holy Table. We sense the quiet intimacy of that mystic fellowship. We hear the rise and fall of the dear voice as it speaks its never-to-be-forgotten words of parting and solace. We finger lovingly the precious pages of John, burdened with the prayers and promises of that immortal-hour. Generations of men and women have nourished their life and revived their souls at these unending springs. Listen to some of those words that shall never die:

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another...by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:34-35).

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places (mansions), if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” (14:1-2).

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you” (14:18).

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you....Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (14:27).

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth....He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (16:13-14).

And Jesus prayed with them what is really the Lord’s Prayer—“That they may all be one....so that the world may know that you have sent me” (17:21-22).

When Mrs. Taylor and I were in Jerusalem in 1965, we visited the Upper Room. Jerusalem at that time was a divided city. The Jews controlled half of it and the Palestinians controlled the other half. There was a kind of “no-man’s-land” dividing the two parts of the city. Soldiers with machine guns patrolled both sides of “No-Man’s Land”. When you went from one part of the city to the other your baggage was carried by the Palestinians into the neutral zone and left there. Then the Jews came and picked it up and brought it to you on the Jewish side of the city. It was a tense time in Jerusalem. When we visited the Upper Room we noticed that soldiers had filled the bell tower with sand bags and they were keeping watch with their machine guns always ready to fire. They had taken a place of peace and made it a place of war. They had taken a place of love and made it a place of hate. They had taken a place of reverence and made it a place of violence. They had taken a place of humility and made it a place of pride. The tower was covered with the pock-marks of exploded shells. It reminds us that we always celebrate the supper in a world like that. Palestine is still exploding with hatred, murder, and heartbreak.

“The Lord’s Supper is that service which is most characteristically Christian....In it the whole gospel is contained and set forth. Besides this, it is the only act of Christian corporate worship, apart from baptism, for which we have our Lord’s direct command, and for which we have New Testament example....It is the Lord’s own service on the Lord’s own day” (William Robinson, *The Administration of The Lord’s Supper*, 7)

In our Christian Churches we have sought to return to biblical teaching on both baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism initiates us into Christ, into birth from above, into moral cleansing (forgiveness), into the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, and the Lord’s Supper assists us to continue to grow and develop and mature in Christ and in moral practice. We celebrate the Lord’s Supper each Sunday because we believe the early Christians observed it at least that often and because we need this experience for our moral development in Christ. It isn’t enough to celebrate the Supper each Sunday; we need to understand why we keep it any Sunday or anytime. Jesus said, “As often as you do” this, do it in remembrance of me. Why is the Lord’s Supper at the center of our worship?

We celebrate the Supper because it is vitally related to our lives in this world now. The elements are bread and wine—common, material elements of everyday life. In the Christian faith material is not the opposite of spiritual. “God uses the natural, material things of this world to speak to us about the reality of the spiritual world” (*For All God’s Worth*, 13). As C.S. Lewis said: “God loves matter; He invented it.” Don’t despise these simple elements because they are material—the highest revelation of God we have is a material revelation—“The Word became flesh and lived among us.” These ordinary, common, physical, material elements of bread and wine have been given a meaning and significance and value far beyond themselves. “This is my body....This is my blood”—“This means my body”, “This means my blood.” In the Lord’s Supper our Lord’s death is made real and redemptive to us.

Our participation in the Lord’s Supper—our receiving the bread and the wine—transfigures and transforms the life of this world, making all things new, investing everything and every action we take with a new significance. We are the people of God. We are the community of the Holy Spirit. We are a counter-culture placed in this world to transform it, to demonstrate in it what it means to be a part of the Kingdom of God. Nothing that a person who is baptized, who is in Christ, who accepts the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper—nothing in that person’s life—one’s life of business, one’s recreation, one’s politics—nothing can be exempt from the moral demands of Christ. To accept the benefits of Christ’s death is to promise to look at all of life in the coming week through the eyes of Christ. That involves how we treat our families, the people at work, the people we don’t like, the strangers we meet, the people of other races and colors, fellow Christians.

We participate in the Lord’s Supper because in the breaking of the bread and the pouring out of the wine we become aware of a sense of Christ’s presence with us. His presence is not in the elements—the bread and the wine. His presence is in the action of our faith, receiving the elements, opening our hearts and minds to Christ. Listen to Paul carefully: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing (communion, participation) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing (communion, participation) in the body of Christ?” (I Cor. 10:16-17). Do you remember the two persons Jesus met on the way to Emmaus after his resurrection: “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (Luke 24:30-31). Our Lord is not dead, he is alive and he can meet us in our worship and on the road of life. We don’t commune with a memorial, we commune with a person. “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”. “Do this for my re-calling”.

In the Ephesian letter Paul prays: “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (3:17). As we participate in the Supper memory turns into an experience and an encounter. We can be aware of a sense of Christ’s presence with us as we participate in the feast. Christ is able to do for us all that his disciples found that he could do for them in the days of his flesh. We receive him “in all his benefits.” He gives us forgiveness and he renews us; he teaches us his will and makes us strong to do it; he heals our wounds and comforts our sorrows; he brings us back to the Father and assures us of our place in the Father’s house. In the Lord’s Supper everything is designed to make us aware of his presence. “Memory is absence felt; communion is presence realized.”

“Here, O my Lord, I see Thee face to face;
Here would I touch and handle things unseen,
Here grasp with firmer hand the eternal grace,
And all my weariness upon Thee lean”

—Horatio Bonar

“Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you.” Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.