



Where Did This "Maundy Thursday" come from ?

There are lots of words we use in church that are not part of our everyday vocabulary. Words like "liturgy," "justification," and "hallowed." "Maundy" certainly fits into that category.

The Thursday of Holy Week has been referred to by the church as Maundy Thursday for centuries. The word "maundy" is derived from the Latin *mandatum* meaning "commandment." (English words "mandate," "mandatory," "command" and "demand" are all derived from this Latin word). The *mandatum* referred to on this special Thursday is found in Jesus' words to His apostles as recorded in John 13:34: "*A new command I give you: love one another.*"

Of course, the command to love one another is found throughout the Bible. The "new" part of that command is found in the next sentence: "*As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*" We are to love one another *as Jesus loved us*. And how would that be? In a word: "unconditionally."

Loving others unconditionally - as Jesus did - means loving each other when our love is not returned. Loving others when they are "unloveable." Loving others when there is absolutely nothing in it for us. Loving others by doing what they need - even when we don't feel like giving what they need. In the next sentence Jesus went on to say that this kind of love is something that demonstrates to others that we are truly disciples of Jesus.

On "Maundy" Thursday Christians around the world gather to recall the events that took place on that night when Jesus was betrayed. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Matthew 26:20-30; Mark 14:17-26; and Luke 22:14-35) concentrate on the institution of the Lord's Supper, so Holy Communion is always celebrated in worship services that day.

The gospel of John (chapters 13-16) focuses instead on the Lord's final teachings to His disciples, including His example of humble, servanthood demonstrated when He washed their feet. In later centuries, some Christians would combine the two emphases and commemorate the Last Supper with a ceremonial foot-washing, which came to be known in French as a *maundy*, a shorter form of *mandatum*. That French word became a descriptive term applied to the day, becoming "maunde" in Middle English. Eventually, its spelling was standardized as "maundy," the word we use today.

One tradition typically observed after the communion meal in Maundy Thursday worship services is that of stripping the altar. The members of the altar guild remove all vessels, crosses, books, candles, linens, paraments, banners, and other decorations from the altar and chancel area. This ancient ritual is a powerful and dramatic reenactment of the Lord's humiliation at the hands of the Roman soldiers. As the altar is being stripped, left bare or adorned only with black paraments, it is transformed from the communion table of Maundy Thursday into the tomb slab of Good Friday.

While we're at it, I might as well refer to a couple other unusual words we will use during Holy Week: *seder* and *tenebrae*.

Seder is a Hebrew word meaning "order" or "sequence". The Passover Seder is the special meal where special foods are eaten in a specific "order." This seder meal relives the enslavement and subsequent Exodus of the Children of Israel from Ancient Egypt and is designed to help participants remember what God did for His people in that Passover event.

Tenebrae is a Latin word meaning "darkness." In many churches the Good Friday worship is marked by the progressive extinguishing of candles as each of the "seven last words" spoken by Jesus on the cross are read. The final candle to be extinguished is the Christ Candle - a candle that calls to mind the fact that Jesus came to be a "Light to the world." The Christ Candle is then removed from the sanctuary

symbolizing Jesus being cast out of the Father's presence as part of taking the punishment for our sin. It is a very stark visual reminder that Jesus had his life snuffed out by Satan and all the "forces of darkness." *But* the Tenebrae service ends with the Christ Candle brought back into the sanctuary and placed on the altar. It serves as a reminder to return on Easter Sunday morning when that Christ Candle will be re-lit as we celebrate Jesus' Resurrection and the fact that because of His death and Resurrection there is a "light at the end of the tunnel for all who trust in Him.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to <mailto:pastor@livingwordlutheran.net>