

# HOLY READING FOR MAUNDY THURSDAY

## SELECTED PRAYERS

from Common Worship

Gracious God, you have invited us to share in the supper which your Son gave to his Church to proclaim his death until he comes: may he nourish us by his presence, and unite us in his love; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *AMEN.*

Merciful God, we entrust to your unfailing and tender care this night those who are ill or in pain, knowing that whenever danger threatens your everlasting arms are there to hold us safe. Comfort and heal them, and restore them to health and strength; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *AMEN.*

Be present, O merciful God, and protect us through the silent hours of this night, so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this fleeting world, may rest upon your eternal changelessness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *AMEN.*

Visit this place, O Lord, we pray; may your holy angels dwell with us in peace, and may your blessing be always upon us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *AMEN.*

## HOLY THURSDAY: TAKE A BLESSING

Jan Richardson

The story is told of St. Brigid, the beloved Celtic saint and leader of the early church in Ireland, that a man with leprosy came to her one day. Knowing the saint's reputation for hospitality, the man says to Brigid, "For God's sake, Brigid, give me a cow." Brigid's response suggests this man may have made a habit of such requests; though normally lavish with her generosity, Brigid tells the man to leave her alone. He persists.

Brigid asks the man how it might be if they prayed that God would heal him of his leprosy. "No," the man tells her, "I get more this way than if I were clean." Brigid, in her turn, persists with him, urging him to "take a blessing and be cleansed." The man acknowledges he is indeed in much pain; he gives in and accepts the blessing and the gift of healing it brings. So great is his gratitude to Brigid—and to God—that he vows his devotion to Brigid and pledges to be her servant and woodman.

Sometimes it can be daunting to receive a blessing. As this man with leprosy recognized, a blessing requires something of us. It does not leave us unchanged. A blessing offers us a glimpse of the wholeness that God desires for us and for the world, and it beckons us to move in the direction of this wholeness. It calls us to let go of what hinders us, to cease clinging to the habits and ways of being that may have become comfortable but that keep us less than whole.

This can take some work.

Part of the challenge involved with a blessing is that receiving it actually places us for a time in the position of doing no work—of simply allowing it to come. For those who are accustomed to constantly doing and giving and serving, being asked to stop and receive can cause great discomfort. To receive a blessing, we have to give up some of our control. We cannot direct how the blessing will come, and we cannot define where the blessing will take us. We have to let it do its own work in us, beyond our ability to chart its course.

On the night that Jesus takes up his basin and towel and begins to wash the feet of his disciples, Simon Peter learns how difficult and how wondrous it can be to “take a blessing,” as Brigid put it. He resists, then allows himself to receive, the grace of it dripping from his toes.

This blessing will indeed require something of Simon Peter and of his fellow disciples. When Jesus has finished the washing, put on his robe, put away his towel and bowl, he turns to them and says, “Do you know what I have done to you? . . . If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus continues, “servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

*You are blessed if you do them.*

A blessing is not finished until we let it do its work within us and then pass it along, an offering grounded in the love that Jesus goes on to speak of this night. Yet we cannot do this—as the disciples could not do this—until we first allow ourselves to simply receive the blessing as it is offered: as gift, as promise, as sign of a world made whole.

During this Holy Week, I am offering a series of blessings for Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. As we move through these days, may these blessings come as gift, as grace. In this week, may we take a blessing, and become one in turn:

## **Blessing You Cannot Turn Back**

*for Holy Thursday*

As if you could  
stop this blessing  
from washing  
over you.

As if you could  
turn it back,  
could return it  
from your body  
to the bowl,  
from the bowl  
to the pitcher,  
from the pitcher  
to the hand  
that set this blessing  
on its way.

As if you could  
change the course  
by which this blessing  
flows.

As if you could  
control how it  
pours over you—  
unbidden,  
unsought,  
unasked,  
yet startling  
in the way  
it matches the need  
you did not know  
you had.

As if you could  
become undrenched.

As if you could  
resist gathering it up  
in your two hands  
and letting your body  
follow the arc  
this blessing makes.

There's a both then-and-now quality to the night. We are back *then*, right there in the garden at Gethsemane. Will we too fall asleep on the watch? And here and *now*, Maundy Thursday night passing into Friday morning, Jesus is right here, in the bread and the wine on the altar of repose.

We have the chance to stay awake, to not go to sleep, on the suffering of our Lord, as well as the suffering of our loved ones and neighbors this day, this very night.

The lyrics of *Stay with me* resound in my head: "Stay with me, Remain here with me, Watch and pray, Watch and pray." They are good words for the entirety of the Lenten journey. This broken world needs us to watch (and really *see*) the broken places and people and to then pray, pray, and pray.

Wherever you will be on Maundy Thursday, whether there is an organized vigil or not, won't you watch and pray?