

THE FIRST QUESTION

Good Friday, 2013 – John 18:1 – 19:42

The wisdom behind so much of Christian worship has to do with placing us as worshippers inside the texts we read and the events we recall – in order to experience their power; in order to lose our safe distance from them and in some measure, we hope, to be changed. The wisdom of sacred ritual extends beyond Christian worship, of course.

For some months, our confirmands have been immersed in the story of the Hebrew people as told in the first two books of the Bible. By Lent, we were learning about how the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had become slaves in Egypt, and how God called Moses to go to Egypt, rally the people, negotiate their release with the Pharaoh, and eventually lead them away from Egypt and the oppression they suffered there.

Pharaoh, of course, wasn't easily persuaded: life was good with the Hebrew people as the underclass of Egyptian society. And so the story tells of God's mighty acts on behalf of the Hebrew people – ten plagues whose message to Pharaoh was divine punishment as the price for his exploitation of the Jewish people. When Pharaoh finally opened the door a crack after the tenth plague, there followed the miraculous escape of the Hebrew people through the parting of waters. The seabed temporarily became a dry passageway for their exodus, but was not available, we read, for Pharaoh's army who pursued them.

The exodus was a defining moment for the Hebrew people in their dawning understanding of who God is and who they were as the children of God. There was no ambiguity concerning God's faithfulness to them in the events they experienced. Truly, they had been rescued through God's intervention. And so, the meal they celebrated in Egypt on the night the tenth plague came upon the land became an annual ritual they observed in order to keep alive the events of their rescue and the memory of God's intervention on their behalf. The feast is called Passover because, unlike the previous nine plagues that were brought upon Egypt, the Hebrew people were not susceptible to the tenth plague, the death of the oldest child. The plague "passed over" them.

The aim of the ritual meal, the Seder, is to immerse everyone at table in the story. There is a narrative: everything is symbolic. The matzoh is the unleavened bread they ate: there was no time for it to rise. Parsley or celery dipped in salt water reminds them of the tears shed during their years of suffering. There are bitter herbs, again reminiscent of their suffering. There is a mixture that looks like mortar to remind them that they were the workforce behind some of Egypt's great monuments. And wine is spilled: ten drops, one for each plague. The aim is for a past event to become a present reality; that those around the table recognize their continuity with their forebears, their ancestors in the faith.

The Christian tradition also uses ritual to allow a past event to become a present reality; and how we worship on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are among our most powerful liturgies. Last night, we read about Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, and then we invited those present to enter into John's gospel by having their feet washed. We heard from Saint Paul the account of Jesus' last meal with his disciples, and then we ate and drank in the place of his first disciples.

Today, we take our place on Calvary among those who watched in horror the torturous death of their beloved teacher some 2000 years ago: death by crucifixion. The story of Christ's suffering and death is not proclaimed by the pastor or priest, but is rather shared by members of the community: we tell one another this story, because it is ours. Last Sunday, we dramatized the story with members of our community taking the part of the characters about whom we would normally read. The story is given over to us in these Passion Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday rituals; it become ours; we enter into it; a past event becomes a present reality, and we are changed, in some measure, by the power the experience holds for us.

Some years on Good Friday, I sing the Solemn Reproaches at our service. The Reproaches seek to connect Jesus' suffering and death with our present-day sins: racism, war, injustice, anti-Semitism. They are written as if Christ is speaking to us from the cross, and their intent is to remove the safe distance we are tempted to keep from his suffering and death.

Today, we are doing something different. Jesus will still speak to us through the words of the Taizé chant we will sing; but the words are not exclusively from the cross. They were first heard in Gethsemane when Jesus and his disciples went there to pray. Jesus is aware that those who are conspiring against him are making their move, and he pleads with his disciples to stay close, keep watch. "Stay with me, remain here with me, watch and pray," he begs them/he begs us. "Watch and pray not to give way to temptation. The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak. My heart is nearly broken with sorrow. Remain here with me, stay awake and pray. Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Father, if this cannot pass me by without my drinking it, your will be done." And always, "Stay with me, remain here with me, watch and pray."

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" our Hymn of the Day asks. And we are inclined to answer, "Yes. We have entered into the story, and we feel its power."

But all of this is secondary. Where *we* are is not nearly as important as another question: "Where is Jesus?" And this first question and its answer are the good news of this Good Friday. If there were every any doubt about Jesus' location, Jesus' loyalty, Jesus' identity, his hanging on a cross in disgrace and humiliation is the answer. He is fully present; he is truly present with us. The last temptation of Christ, Nikos Kazantzakis wrote, was to escape; to make other choices; to avoid the persecution that comes from people resisting the purity and goodness and challenge and sacrifice of God's holy Word. We tend not to think that Jesus had other options, but of course he did. He could easily have chosen the course of least resistance; but for the sake of the whole human family, he chose to reveal the power the gospel held for him and holds for all people.

Jesus chose death that we might know that he enters into our story and changes it/ change us. Jesus chose death so that we, too, might discover God's power in our lives. May the grace of the Holy Spirit make it so!