

Thursday, March 29, 2018

Maundy Thursday

Exodus 1-14; 1 Corinthians 11.23-26; John 13.1-17, 31b-35

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

During most of the year, at the fraction—the moment when I break the bread at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer—I begin the Fraction Anthem: “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us” and the congregation responds: “Therefore let us keep the feast.” And on most Sundays, I begin with the A-word and your response ends with the A-word. While the rubrics in the Prayer Book specifically state “In Lent, Alleluia (I can say that in Lent because I am using it in an academic explanation) is omitted. I intentionally don’t even use this anthem during Lent because invariably someone goes on autopilot and add the A-word. Or, truth be told, I fear that I will go on autopilot and start with the A-word.

But if anything, particularly at our Maundy Thursday service, which is the last making of Eucharist before Easter, it would be especially appropriate to use the anthem “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us; Therefore let us keep the feast.” Because this is the beginning of the three-day journey that is the Passover of our Lord. This is the beginning of our Passover.

Now, we need to be careful about how we incorporate Passover imagery into our own Christian liturgical practices—such as trying to recreate a Seder meal as part of our worship experience—so as not to unintentionally co-opt the most holy day for our Jewish sisters and brothers. But we can certainly draw parallels where appropriate. After all, Jesus was a devout Jew. And his last meal with his closest friends was the Passover Seder. Because of this, and because of what Jesus accomplished through his death and resurrection, Christians do—and rightly so—remember the old Passover as a parallel to the new Passover. Over the Triduum—the three days comprised of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday—we do keep the Christian Passover. The three-day commemoration of how Jesus is the lamb whose blood saves his people from death. This parallel is not just an interesting tidbit of religious history, but is actually ancient imagery given new meaning in Christ. Some of it unexpectedly so.

We begin to see some of this imagery played out in our Old Testament and Epistle readings for today. First the Old Testament reading. In our passage from Exodus, we have the account of the institution of the original Passover. God commands Moses to instruct the people as to how they are to prepare for their departure from Egypt by having them sacrifice lambs. The meat of the lambs will provide the final meal that the Israelites will have before leaving on the Exodus. Not only will the lambs provide food for their nourishment, the blood of the lambs—the blood signifying a covenant between God and his people—when placed on doorposts and the lintels of their homes, will be a sign to God to pass over, to spare, the Israelites. Sparing them so that they could be taken on a journey to the Promised Land. A journey that would lead them ultimately to a new life of freedom.

And then in the Epistle reading, we hear Paul recount the institution of a new sacrament, the Eucharist. How Jesus took the bread, gave thanks for it, broke it, and said “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11.24). And in a similar manner, how he took

the wine and said “This is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11.25). The institution of another meal, not unlike the meal instituted for the Israelites, signifying a new covenant between God and his people. A covenant, a meal, that similarly is a sign of the saving of God’s people from sin and death.

It is easy to see how the early Church saw in the Lord’s supper, with its images of a meal that sustains the people on their journey and the blood that saves them from the power of death, the familiar images from the Passover. From these similar images, it was a small step for the early Church to see Jesus as the lamb who delivers God’s people from sin and death. As the one who leads God’s people on a new exodus, a new Passover, into a new life. Just as the people of Israel were saved by the sign of the lamb’s blood, those of us who live under the new covenant are saved by the blood of a different lamb—Jesus Christ. Blood not smeared on wooden doorposts, but blood left on the wood of the cross.

Two Passovers, as it were. Two meals. Two covenants. Two journeys to new life. Both centered around the body and blood of lambs.

Just as the imagery of these two Passovers is similar, the purpose of these Passovers is similar. As the story of the first Passover tells us, that first Passover was a journey to freedom. Freedom from the oppression and servitude imposed on the Israelites by their Egyptian masters. Freedom that is signified by the blood of numerous lambs. The new Passover, the new covenant, is also a journey of freedom from an oppressive master. Only this is not a human master. This new Passover, made possible through a single lamb, Jesus Christ who is the Lamb of God, is freedom from the bonds of sin and death. A freedom that like the Passover lambs, is achieved through the death of the Lamb of God.

But the second Passover, the second covenant, contains a twist not found in the first. A reversal of sorts. This we see in what plays out in our Gospel reading for tonight. The story of another Passover meal. The final Passover meal that Jesus will share with his disciples. And, in a way, the first Passover meal of the new covenant. Or at least, one that foreshadows what will happen in the following few days, securing the shift to a new Passover for those who choose to follow Jesus. It is somewhat ironic that Jesus and his disciples have come to Jerusalem this one last time to share the Passover meal. To share in the celebration of freedom from a life of servitude. Only here, Jesus uses the occasion to take on the role of the lowliest household servant.

After the meal, Jesus takes off his robe and puts a towel around himself—the attire of a servant. He pours water in a basin and begins to wash the feet of those assembled. The task of a servant. Of course, there are protests from some of the disciples, particularly from Peter. To which Jesus responds, “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set an example, that you should do as I have done to you” (Jn 11.14-15). He then emphasizes the point by telling them, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn 11.34).

The message Jesus gives to his disciples—and to us—is that our journey to freedom, while in many ways not unlike that first Passover, differs in a significant way. In that first Passover, everything the people did was to protect themselves. To insure that they were saved from death. In this new Passover, we can do nothing to insure that we are saved. That is already assured through the fact that the blood used is not that of an ordinary lamb put on a doorpost as a sign. This time, the blood is that of none other than the Son of God. That blood does not merely signal our desire or intention to be saved. Instead, that blood secured and assures us of our salvation. What Jesus does ask, however, is that we use the freedom he secured on our behalf—the new life secured on our behalf—to freely enter into a life of servitude. Servitude on his behalf. Servitude whereby we share with others the love he has for us.

At the beginning of this new Passover, at the beginning of this new life of freedom from sin and death, we are reminded that through his blood, we are all Jesus' disciples. And that we are invited by our Lord to love one another more humbly, more deeply, more fully, through our own actions. Demonstrating the essence of holy love that he showed for us all through his own actions—especially in going to the cross.