

Violence vs. Faith and Patience Holy Thursday Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper
April 17, 2014 7:30 PM Ex 12:1-8, 11-14; 1 Cor 11:23-26; **Jn 13:1-15** (When Jesus worked signs and wonders, they were signs of healing and forgiveness and acceptance and restoration and new life.)

The Seder meal, the **Passover meal**, that Jesus celebrated with his disciples was significant in a way that most gentiles cannot understand. It was a renewal for Jesus' people of their origins, **the event that gave them an identity as a people**. But as we can see in all four gospels from the beginning of each one to the point now being described, there is a growing discomfort between Jesus and the leaders, the professors, those who professed the Jewish identity, not because anybody was bad or evil, but because in the original story **there was something Jesus could not accept**.

The story of the Passover is a very violent story, and Jesus was not a man of violence. And the violence was ascribed to God. Pharaoh was mean and unjust and very powerful, but God would show him and did! Signs and wonders—but all the signs and wonders extolled by the great story of Exodus were very destructive and death-dealing: crops first overrun with locusts, then fish destroyed in the waters, then the halls of homes full of frogs, and then the death of the firstborn, as the quotation was “of man and beast.”

Jesus also worked signs and wonders, but not that kind. **When Jesus worked signs and wonders, they were signs of healing and forgiveness and acceptance and restoration and new life—very different.** So we can imagine **how uncomfortable Jesus was at this Seder in recounting the story of God**, whom he was embodying in his life of service and love and friendship and forgiveness and peace, how this God is being represented in the story as very different.

In the air during **that week there was Messianic fervor**. No doubt many in Israel hoped that God would soon show his glory once again and smite the Romans with the same mighty hand and outstretched arm with which he smote the Egyptians. Indeed, only a few days earlier the crowds had acclaimed Jesus: “Hosanna to the Son of David.” That's a victory celebration. Jesus knew that no one ever sang “Hosanna” to a victim. **But being a victor is not the cup that Jesus accepted.**

In a way, in a true way, in a very authentic way, the gift of Jesus' body and blood in the Eucharist really defines Jesus' whole life and mission in a clear, I want to say, unmistakable way, but that's probably a mistake; it probably is mistakable. **He came to show us the Father's love, to do what he saw the Father doing**—that's what he said; at least that's the message of the Fourth Gospel—not to do his own will, but to do the will of the one who sent him. And what was that? It was not to destroy human life. Quite the opposite, it was to **absorb violence, to receive but not pass on the violence that is so endemic to human history.**

Of course there has always been a certain amount of physical violence in nature, but human beings with our godlike powers, with our creativity, **we have introduced more violence than nature herself could ever think of.** On a regular basis, violence has torn apart

lives of individuals, families, towns, cities, nations, and continents; and human beings seem to be totally helpless at stemming this tide. And the hope and belief that God will put all things right with some new and decisive violence that will destroy all other violence is actually quite naïve, but quite widespread among believers. **So Jesus must have been quite uncomfortable, quite perplexed, quite sorrowful on this last night of his life surrounded as he was by all these people awaiting the triumph of God.**

Of course we have to recognize that poor Judas and poor Caiaphas and poor Annas and the poor Sanhedrin all have to be excused. After all they simply believed what they were told: “‘Vengeance is mine’ says the Lord.” After all, **there is nothing more natural than retaliation.** Children do it. One child hits another, and the other hits back—no instruction needed. The instruction is about resisting the temptation to retaliate. And a case could be made, and I think should be, that **violence is basically retaliation for injuries either real or imagined.** And imagined injuries can be as deep and as painful as real ones. For example, career criminals are spurning a world that has never accepted them. Gangs are fighting in a dog eat dog world for children who have no families to fend for them. Wars are based on perceptions of mistreatment, injustice, insult, or disrespect; perceptions of, whether there is any intention behind it is quite another thing, and doesn’t really matter.

Jesus’ view was that all these claims belong in the court the Father who alone is just. This means not only that people have to refrain from taking the law into their own hands, it means that **whole societies have to wait upon the justice of God. This requires faith and patience, even in a secular age. There is simply no other solution.** Jesus is proclaiming that God is ready and always was to forgive all transgressions. And if people really want to inflict injury in retribution for all their hurts, real or imagined, he will take all of that into himself. But we have to be clear about something most Christians haven’t been in the history of the Church: **the whole need for retribution is a human one, not a divine one. If we don’t get that, we don’t get anything Jesus really taught.**

Receiving the body and the blood of the Lord is meant to empower his followers to live in his vision, his peaceful vision, his non-violent vision, his violence-absorbing vision. And of course for that to happen, not only do his followers have to “do this in memory of me,” they not only have to gather and share the Eucharist, but they also have to live and belong to, live in and belong to, a kingdom not of this world, because if this world were all that there is, Jesus would have been out of his mind; and, indeed, many people think he was. The difference is: Do you believe in a kingdom not of this world? His willingness to accept the Cross implies that he was living for a goal beyond the visible, **a new kind of world that reflected the heart of the Father, where greatness is measured by service and primacy belongs to the lowest.**

Now we see why the apostles were so confused, because never in a million years would it have occurred to them that **this is the true nature of reality,** that this is the way to life. Many times they toasted to *l’chaim*, and now when it comes to reveal itself to them, they don’t even recognize what it is. And probably we are just like them. So to make that world that Jesus is embodying and leading us to more real, **we need to fill our senses with Jesus’ departing gesture.** We need to **allow our feet to be washed, and we need to also wash the feet of others;** and with this very sensate experience begin the walk to Calvary.