

The Paschal Triduum of the Death, Burial, and Resurrection of the Lord

Patient Transformation **Holy Thursday Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper**

April 2, 2015 7:30 PM Ex 12:1-8, 11-14; 1 Cor 11:23-26; **Jn 13:1-15** (Jesus' death relates to the bread and to the cup that we share, because Jesus himself made the connection.)

Our second graders are preparing diligently to receive their First Holy Communion, and for some reason this idea of **unleavened bread** has really stuck, and they love to talk about unleavened bread, which is great for me. It gives me an entrée; then I can talk about the Passover, the history of Israel, and then I can tie it into Jesus. It works pretty well. But one classroom didn't know what unleavened bread was, just one. So after starting off I said, "Well, what's all this about unleavened bread?" And they all looked at each other; they didn't know. "Come on, everyone else knows what unleavened bread is; how come you don't know what unleavened bread is about?" So one little girl said, "It means there is something missing." True enough, but **a powerful sign to the Jewish people of their tradition, of their history, of being saved by God** in a most unlikely way from the power of pharaoh, really the Egyptian state.

But Jesus the night before he dies starts to change the script. It says in the First Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation: **"Before extending his arms between heaven and earth in the everlasting sign of the covenant, he desired to celebrate the Passover with his disciples."** The Fourth Eucharistic Prayer says: **"The night before Jesus died he showed the depth of his love."**

Now what is really remarkable is that Jesus is facing death and he is not really too concerned, at least not principally concerned about his own death. **He is concerned about his friends**, and not that they are really his friends at all, but **he is their friend**. He is their friend and he is worried about them. What's going to happen to them as he goes to the Father? **He knows his death is imminent**. He knows things haven't gone too well in his mission. He has really deliberately antagonized the chief priests and the Sanhedrin by throwing out the animals from the Temple, which of course makes Temple sacrifice impossible. He has created arguments here and there with highly placed officials and teachers. **So the end is coming, and he knows it. But he was their beloved friend.**

The way John writes this story there is surely **a sense of disappointment**. They really don't seem, that is, "they" being the disciples, don't really seem to be up to what's happening. Don't forget a few days earlier the crowds, mind you, acclaimed Jesus "Messiah." But **the disciples don't seem to be treating him like a Messiah**. They don't seem to be sure of anything.

Jesus already commented a long time ago: **"A prophet is never accepted in his own home among his own kin."** **Now is that happening with his own disciples?** Well with at least one, maybe others. Is doubt brewing? It seems so. The picture the evangelists, all four of them, paint, especially John, is of **a pall of ambiguity settling over this group of relatively clueless men, who don't get what Jesus has been teaching, alluding to, and plainly stating all along**. We might ask ourselves, don't they want to get it? What's the problem? Well we can't answer that.

They call him “Master and Teacher,” not Messiah, but “Master and Teacher.” He alludes to that in today’s reading. But the problem is: **they haven’t learned too much from the teacher; they haven’t served the master.** In fact, there is this rather poignant little detail that all the guests arrived for the dinner and there is no one to wash feet, and not one of them takes the initiative. It’s simple courtesy. It’s simple hospitality. But none of them does anything. **Jesus has to show them at the very end of his life how to be courteous, how to care about other people.** Now mind you, and don’t forget, Jesus has already sent them out two-by-two. They have been empowered to heal the sick. They have been empowered to expel demons, and they have done this successfully—but they have not been transformed. Jesus really didn’t come simply to empower. **He came to transform, as he himself has been transformed in his humanity by the love of the Father, by the Spirit of the Father.**

Jesus doubtless understood that **this is going to be a long process**, so you shouldn’t be worried yourself if you are not too far along; just think of the disciples. **God is infinitely patient**, and Jesus was being very patient the night before he died. He knew that **transformation** is a rocky road. And for some reason that we cannot put into so many words, for some reason, he also knew that it **would only be possible by his own complete gift of himself on the Cross.** Why this should be, we need to pray about and ponder. I don’t think we can actually ever explain it, as in the catechism for example. Explanations all fall short of the meaning of Jesus’ death and why he underwent it.

But to prepare them for the shock of his impending death and to help them gain from it, he seats them at table and he takes **the script of the Haggadah**, that wonderful story of freedom and deliverance and salvation told in the context of a meal and various rituals. And **he turns it into a reference to the presence moment.** No longer is this about what happened long ago. It’s now about what is happening now, **what God is doing right now: delivering his people**, not from the power of pharaoh, which is only a physical, military power, but **from the power of evil and darkness itself.**

So he takes this unleavened bread, that all the second graders know about, and he says, **“This is given for you.”** We should never forget that Jesus died first and foremost **for his own disciples**, which hopefully includes you and all those who come to the Eucharist. But he died for more than that. **He died for many.** Well who are the many? Al Qaeda, the Islamic states? **Jesus died for all of his enemies**, and they are about as hostile as anyone could be. So, yes, he died for them, and for the disciples, and for you, and for me. This great crisis in Jesus’ life he turns into a gift to those he has befriended, who haven’t befriended him quite yet, but whom he has befriended. And **he is trying to show something that when all the familiar avenues of life are cut off, something marvelous can happen because “With God nothing is impossible.”** That the angel Gabriel told Jesus’ mother on the day he was conceived. “With God all things are possible,” or “Nothing is impossible with God.” It depends how you want to translate it.

So what are the possibilities that are now open to Jesus? They look terribly dire. There is no exit. Oh yes there is; there is an exit. **Death itself is an exit and an entrance into glory, into eternal life.** And not only does Jesus intend to go there, **he intends to take us with him**, because the world, the creation, that Jesus believed in was a creation in which there is no end to goodness and no end to life, because goodness and life really are divine,

eternal, and love wanting to share itself, himself, herself, the self, the divine self with all that God has created. So **Jesus can really go to the Cross and actually continue to trust in his Father.** That's real belief. And he wants us to have that too. He wants us to see what he saw. **He wants to show us the way.** And sometimes words get in our way. We spend too much time in our heads. **This is a message for the heart.** Somehow **Jesus' death brings life.** **Jesus' willingness to embrace people in spite of their cruelty, in spite of their malice and hatred and violence, brings hope.** And that's what he wants to do. He is willing to spend himself to do that, to bring life and hope to people. It's not logical. **It's a motivation beyond our ordinary capacity, but we can also grow in our capacity, to welcome and receive this kind of feeling.**

So I suggest that tonight, if possible, **you spend some time pondering this great love** that Jesus in his human nature, in his human life, in his human body is expressing. And whatever the Spirit teaches you, and it will be different person-to-person, it will all be about how **Jesus' death relates to the bread and to the cup that we share, because Jesus himself made the connection.** We didn't invent this connection. Jesus made it in a very crucial moment in his life, hours before his death. So the Eucharist is not only a memorial of Jesus' death, and that's not all he intended it to be, he also intended it to be **food for our journey through life into death, and beyond into life,** because that journey will have many crises, many moments in which the avenues we are used to shut off. And we have to keep in mind, "With God are all possibilities." And if we are faithful to the Eucharist, **the Eucharist will help us to believe and to hold in God's love and goodness, even when we can't experience it.**