

Pentecost 17
7/9/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 12:1 – 14
Ps 149
Romans 138 - 14
Matthew 18:15 - 20

The love of God controls us: Passover and Communion

Was the Last Supper a Passover meal or not? Matthew, Mark and Luke show it as a Passover while John sees it as a preceding meal. It is clear that the original meal Jesus had with his disciples and the words of Institution that have remained so central for Eucharistic theology and practice are built on a typological foundation that is grounded in the Passover. The church reflects this by setting the first reading for Maundy Thursday. But Christian theology finds new meaning here based on Jesus and the events that follow the Last Supper.

1. The central theological theme of the Passover is God as Redeemer: the liberator of the people. The instructions given in Exodus 12 are for an annual memorial of the great redemptive act of God. It is no ordinary meal. The biblical sense of memorial is that it makes effective in the present the freedom God gave in the past. Today when devout Jews celebrate the Passover they are not merely remembering what happened in Egypt. Through the Passover liturgy each generation experiences for themselves God's exodus shaped redemption. In some way, in the present, God brings them over from slavery to freedom.

Christians hold a similar view about the Eucharist. In Christian theology the Greek word for memorial has that same sense of *making the life and meaning of a past event effective in us now*. This sense is reflected in the prayer we sometimes use: *be present among us O Lord, as once among your disciples, and make yourself known even to us in the breaking of bread*. These words remember the events on the Emmaus road, and this is the prayer of our continuing journey with God. The Eucharistic meal recreates us as a people in fellowship with Christ, and leads forward to the fulfilment of his Kingdom.

2. Like the Passover itself, the Lamb is a type: and it is translated into something new. We know that blood rituals abound in the cultures of the world. Much of this is repugnant to us, and at times it contaminates our view of the meaning of the Eucharist.

In the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world Christian theology sees one whose self-giving even to the point of death, opened for us a new path of life. The gap between the will of God and human experience is overcome by Christ's total obedience. Because of this he is designated the Son: the one whose life and actions perfectly represent the will of the Father. From now on when God looks on us, God sees Jesus, the obedient one who stood in our place. In the Eucharistic hymn we shall sing: "for now between our sins and their reward, we set the passion of your son, our Lord." The Resurrection, which is God's gift to us, enables us to see that, despite the

worst we could do, God has opened the Kingdom for us: Jesus is the key. Redemption is gifted to us: it is possible to pass over into a new relationship with God.

3. The Passover meal was eaten at the ready, in hope and expectation. Freedom was coming and this ritual meal was the first move in the people's deliverance. The sense of participating in something active that will come to completion is true for Holy Communion as well. The Bread and the Wine, the elements of creation used in the last supper, remind us of Jesus' past action, but they are also joined to our hope for the future. The bread and wine are the first fruits of the great Messianic banquet promised by God. This meal is the first instalment of something that will one day be enjoyed in all its fullness. To that extent it is right to think of it as an aperitif or an appetiser: something small and tasty that makes us long for more food like this.

Clearly, we can see there are positive things in the first reading, which are foundational for Christian faith. And I hope that it is possible to see that what Jesus gives is not the same as an ancient blood sacrifice, even though blood is kept to show that it was real life that was given for us. But the life that was given was life in which the purposes of God were ultimately victorious.

4. The graphic for today was chosen to own up to the challenge of the first reading. Having created a clear picture of the God of Israel as the one who may be trusted to defend and liberate those in need, the presence of the Angel of death highlights the idea that this same God is the bringer of death to the enemies. This theme is also in the full version of the Psalm we had today, but has been excised from the version we sing.

Is it possible to find a way around the problem highlighted by the graphic? Or is this one of the "nasties" associated with the Eucharist that provides some with the excuse to call for us to cease celebrating it? An honest reading of this text has to face up to this issue. What kind of God would achieve a purpose by means of the mass destruction of apparently innocent people? Christians speak of God's love for all the world in Jesus Christ. Does God not love the Egyptians?

It would be possible to rehearse several attempts to give answer to such questions, but none of them is satisfactory. It is a reality that in the long journey of the people with God, the concept of God has evolved. At times, just as we still do, people of faith employed understandings of God that relate more to their concerns and bias, than to who God is for us.

In this case the context is a struggle between the power of the God of Israel and the power of Pharaoh and Egypt's gods, which are the powers against God. Positively the presence of the Angel means that the power of death is within God's sovereignty, not beyond it. On the other hand, God as the slayer of enemies is a partial and distorted view of God that is corrected within the Bible itself. In Isaiah, when the exiled people are about to enter into their second exodus, Israel's gift of freedom does not occur through the destruction of their enemies. Instead, it brings them enlightenment. As Christians we make much of the fact that on the Cross Jesus prayed for forgiveness for his enemies. In Christian theology the Resurrection makes it clear that the power of God is greater than the power of death. And where humans

have worked to destroy God works to bring new life. That is why Jesus restores the relationship with his frightened, deserting disciples and renews them in their call to serve.

The Last Supper has associations with the Passover, but it is not the Passover the disciples are called to celebrate. The call is to celebrate a simple meal in remembrance of Jesus in whom, from a negative context of betrayal, God's powerful love for the world is made manifest in a new way. In the evolution of our idea of God a new stage is reached. From this point we are asked to live with this story at the centre. From now on we are called to live allowing the love of God to control us.

There is a real sense in which, from the beginning, the church has been called to a life of continuing conversion: a life of being ready to rediscover the gifts of God, and to live in the nourishment they give. This means always being open to the way God works to show us that the divine ways are life giving, and that we too readily settle for something less, such as things that are destructive or life denying.

We need not settle for less. And wherever and in whatever form we encounter the uncomfortable Angel of death, whether through deluge, betrayal or surrounding threats, perhaps one thing we can say for it is this. If it sets us back on our heels and sends out us in search of the thing that really matters, then in some strange way it too could prove to be a messenger of life.