

Easter Evening

(First Sunday of Easter)

Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 114; Luke 24:13-49; I Corinthians 5:6b-8

Isaiah 25:6-9 is a message of hope and triumph over death to an embattled Israel. God will act to save his people, Isaiah prophesies. He will fill the people with abundance and joy, because “the shroud (of death) that is cast over all peoples” (vs. 7) will be removed and God “will swallow up death forever”. Through his mighty act of liberation and redemption, God will wipe away all tears, sorrow and disgrace earned at the hands of those who persecuted Israel. All mourning, even death and the sting of death will be removed (vs. 8), for God will bring salvation to all the peoples of the earth.

St. Paul quotes this passage in I Corinthians 15:54 to support his argument for the resurrection of those who belong to Christ. Likewise, the author of Revelation quotes this passage in 7:17 to describe the shalom kingdom that God will build through Jesus Christ.

Psalm 114 deals with a celebration of the Exodus. It begins, “When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became God’s sanctuary, Israel his dominion” (114:1-2). Israel departed from Egypt in order to become in their person, as a nation, the sanctuary or dwelling-place of God. But the author doesn’t develop the point that Israel is the abode of God. Instead, he continues to focus on how God delivered Israel.

The remainder of Psalm 114 describes the overwhelming ways God acted to protect Israel in the wilderness and to bring them to the Promised Land. “The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned back. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. Why is it, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back? O mountains, that you skip like rams? O hills, like lambs? Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rocks into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water” (vss. 3-8).

God delivered Israel at the Red Sea (vss. 3, 5) by parting the waters. He brought a great earthquake upon them at the time of the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai (vss. 4, 6-7). God gave them water from a rock to sustain them in their wilderness wanderings (vs. 8). And, finally, he parted the waters of the Jordan River to bring them into their promised land (vs. 5b). And all this, God did in order to sustain Israel in their pilgrimage and to bring them to his best intentions for them.

And what about us? Has not God worked equally miraculously in our lives and in our corporate history to bring us to God’s place for us?

Luke 24:13-49 consists of two stories. The first is the well-known “Walk to Emmaus”. The second story occurs after the two disciples who were joined by Jesus on that walk return to Jerusalem to share with Jesus’ other followers that Jesus had spoken to them. Suddenly, Jesus joins them all, and walks them through an understanding of the significance of his death and resurrection.

The first story is unique to the Gospel of Luke. In it, two followers of Jesus (one is named Cleopas and the other is unnamed) were walking to Emmaus, a town not far distant from Jerusalem. They were both feeling profoundly sad at the death of Jesus and confused with the rumors of his resurrection. They are joined by Jesus, who is obviously not recognized by them. He asks after their sadness and is consequently lectured on Jesus' death. But it is clear that they do not realize that this stranger with whom they are talking is Jesus. "Then, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interprets to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (24:27). But even with this sharing from scripture, these disciples do not recognize him.

What caused them to finally realize that it was Jesus with whom they were walking and meeting? Jesus is invited by them to take dinner with the two travelers. And the text tells us, "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (24:30-31). And just to be sure the reader has gotten his point, Luke tells us that when these two followers returned hurriedly to Jerusalem and shared their experience with the disciples, Luke concludes, "Then they told what had happened on the road, and how Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (24:35).

Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread! For the third time in Luke, the formula for the sacrament of holy communion is presented – "he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them" (24:30, but also see the feeding of the five thousand in Luke 9:16 and the institution of the Lord's Supper in Luke 22:19). In each case, the four-staged formula is used – taken (i.e., chosen, called), blessed, broken, given. It is the formula for Holy Communion. But it is also the formula for the authentic following of Jesus. For it is through the living out of that formula that Jesus is both made known to us and made known through us to a blessed and broken world.

The second story immediately follows. The two disciples rush back to Jerusalem and come bursting into the gathering of Jesus' followers to tell them "what had happened on the road, and how Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (vs. 35). Suddenly, Jesus stood in their midst, showed his pierced hands, feet and side and ate with them. Then Jesus said to them, "Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled" (vs. 44).

The formula, "Moses, the prophets and the psalms" are the three main divisions of the Hebrew Bible – that is, the Torah or Law, the prophets (including the historical books) and the writings (including the Psalms, but also Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon). In other words, Jesus is declaring to his disciples that his coming, mission, death and resurrection is at the very heart and moves throughout the entirety of the Hebrew Bible – the only Bible for Jews and even Christian Jews at that time.

And what is that message that appears throughout "Moses, the prophets and the psalms"? Jesus tells the disciples, "Thus it is written that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (vss. 46-47).

The key to understanding this scripture is the use by Luke of three parallel verbs in the infinitive: (1) “the Messiah is *to suffer*”, (2) “*to rise* from the dead on the third day”, and (3) “repentance for forgiveness of sins is *to be proclaimed* in his name to all nations”. “*To suffer, to rise, to be proclaimed*”. Here is the gospel in a nutshell!

“To suffer” does not simply mean the scourging of Jesus. Rather, Luke uses the term frequently to express the full passion of Jesus – from his earliest ministry through his betrayal, trial, beating and crucifixion. The Hebrew Scriptures, Luke declares, deal repeatedly with the suffering of God’s chosen one.

But Jesus is here telling the disciples that, if they are to read the Hebrew Bible discerningly, they will see that “the Messiah is to suffer” and die! Thus, with this statement, Jesus demonstrates to the disciples that the issue with which they have so long struggled – how could Jesus be the divine Messiah and yet suffer – is no issue at all. His suffering and death was what the Bible teaches all along is what the Messiah is to be about – because only in that way could humanity be redeemed. Status does not come by domination, controlling society or lording it over others (even lording it over the Romans) – which was the popular but unbiblical understanding of the Messiah. Rather, it was by “taking the form of a servant and humbling himself, becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8).

But life doesn’t end in a grave, Jesus contends. Messiah is also “to rise from the dead on the third day”. Messiah’s apparently tragic death ends with the triumphant cry, “The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!” Jesus is alive, the resurrected One proclaims. He is not a dead body, lying in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Nor is he a ghost, phantasmically moving around the earth but unable to impact it. Neither is he a resuscitated cadaver. Jesus is – well, Jesus! Jesus still! Jesus alive! Jesus working through his Church to bring to reality God’s intentions for humanity. And thus, it is this resurrected Jesus who empowers his people to carry on the work he began, multiplying him throughout the world in a way he could never accomplish by himself. He is risen, indeed!

Finally, scripture tells the disciples (and us) of their task, as they work for a resurrected Lord. “Repentance for forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (vs. 47). Now that they have not only seen the Messiah suffer and die, but also have seen him, touched him and been with him in his resurrected body, they are to move out into the world, starting with Jerusalem, to share and live out and practice the building of God’s kingdom – the shalom community of vital relationship with God, justice and equitable distribution of wealth “so that there are no poor among you”. Thus, the missiological task of the disciples is summarized in their call, “You are witnesses of these things” (vs. 48). You went through with Jesus the terrible experience of his betrayal, trial and crucifixion, as the powers of Rome and of the Jerusalem Clergy Aristocracy conspired and acted together to eliminate him. You experienced the reality of his resurrection, personally meeting with, holding and touching him – and thus knowing that he had indeed risen from the dead. You have seen that the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as specific passages, proclaims Messianic suffering and resurrection, providing you with the biblical foundations for your experience of him.

Now – go! Get out there in the world filled with Roman oppressors, wealthy exploiters and priestly controllers, and work for the reforming of that world back into the world God created and intended it to be. For you are disciples of Jesus Christ – his hands, his feet, his arms of compassion, his heart alive today and at work throughout the world!

I Corinthians 5:6b-8 is an integral part of a larger passage (5:1-13) that deals with sexual immorality within the Corinthian church, and especially of one believer’s continuing relationship of incest with his stepmother. In this scripture, Paul uses the metaphor of Passover to indicate what is required of the Corinthian church if they are to become right with God and each other.

Paul writes, “Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (5:6b-8).

What Paul is, in essence, saying is that a church can’t authentically celebrate Easter and the resurrection of Christ if anyone in their midst continues to act in ways that will taint the church. In order to make this point, he makes generous use of the practice of Passover that must have been known to his Corinthian readers.

Yeast was not allowed to be used at Passover (Exodus 12:8-20), because the eating of unleavened bread would symbolize to the Jews celebrating Passover the haste with which they had escaped from Egypt. The Israelites departed from Egypt on the day following the Passover, before Pharaoh could change his mind and attempt to keep them in slavery. They left in such haste that the bread they made for their journey wouldn’t even have time to rise, so that bread was made without any yeast within it.

When a household prepared to celebrate the Passover, therefore, it was crucial that all mixing bowls be thoroughly washed so that even the slightest hint of yeast was removed. And why? Because “a little yeast leavens the whole bunch of dough”, and therefore ruins the Passover bread. Likewise, even the slightest hint of immorality must be purged from the Church family, because its presence – even in minutia – will contaminate the whole.

Why, then, was it crucial that the Corinthian Church’s celebration of Easter (which would have been held at about the same time as would Passover) be purged of sexual immorality – and especially the continuing relationship of incest being practiced between this man and his stepmother? “Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed” (vs. 7b), Paul wrote. The high point of the Passover was the presentation and the eating of the lamb sacrificed at Passover (Exod. 12:21; Deut. 16:2, 6) – the lamb whose death provided them with the new life of escape from Egypt. Thus, the Easter season proclaims the sacrifice of Jesus, our “Pascal Lamb”, which sets us free.

Consequently, Paul concludes, “let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (vs. 8). The Feast of the Resurrection (i.e., Easter) is to be celebrated, not only with hymns and praise and cries of “He is

risen"! It is most fittingly celebrated by lives lived in conformity with the morality, ethics and justice of Jesus!

What, then, is to be done with this man, his stepmother, and with all who persist in sexual immorality? Paul states immediately following today's Epistle Lesson that they are to be banned from the church until they repent (5:9-13). And if they refuse to repent, they should be prevented from ever entering its community again. This is the demand that our celebration of Easter must lay upon us all!

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