

Homily for Holy Thursday 2006

This night as we gather to celebrate Holy Thursday,
Jews around the world are gathering to celebrate Passover.
Our calendars are different and so the dates of these feasts
do not always coincide as they do tonight -
but what a wonder-filled moment it is
when the people of both covenants
celebrate Passover on the same night.

And Passover is what we celebrate here tonight
just as we celebrate it every time we gather for the Eucharist.

Just as Jesus and his friends gathered in the upper room,
to remember what the people of Israel did
with the blood of a sacrificed lamb and unleavened bread,
on the night when the angel of death *passed over* their homes,
so in the Eucharist we gather to remember what Jesus did
on the night before he offered himself on the cross
as the sacrificial lamb,
and we celebrate the Passover meal he left for us to remember him:
a simple meal of bread and wine, become his body and blood,
given to us so that the angel of death might *pass over* us,
that we might be delivered from the death of sin.

Recall the words of the eucharistic prayer we have been praying
all through the season of Lent:
"When we were lost and could not find the way to you,
you loved us more than ever.
Jesus, innocent and without sin,
gave himself into our hands and was nailed to a cross.
Yet before he stretched out his hands between heaven and earth
in the everlasting sign of your covenant,
he desired to celebrate the paschal meal
in the company of his friends...
Take this bread and eat... my body... given for you...
Take this cup and drink... my blood... of the new covenant...
for this is the cup of my blood;
shed for you... for the forgiveness of sins..."

And then these words:
"We do this in memory of Jesus Christ,
our Passover and our lasting peace..."

In ancient Israel,
the angel of death *passed over* the houses of the Israelites
protecting them and delivering them from danger.
And for generations ever since,
Jews have gathered on this same night
to remember how the Lord's saving love
delivered them from danger and death.

The Israelites were oppressed in Egypt

enslaved by their taskmasters,
but delivered by the blood of the sacrificial lamb...

We pray for deliverance this night:
deliverance from whatever shackles us
to waging war in the name of making peace;
deliverance from whatever addicts us
to substances, relationships or entertainments
that are neither healthy nor holy;
deliverance from the desire to fill our lives with more *things*
at the expense of emptying our hearts of true joy;
deliverance from structures and economies
that ride the weakened backs of the world's poor;
deliverance from walls that keep people from our nation
and neighbors from our hearts;
deliverance from the pervasive sadness and anxiety
that so often seem to be the harvest of progress and technology;
deliverance from any attachment to the past
that keeps us from the truth of the present
and the promise of the future;

How much we need this night of prayer,
celebrated under the Passover moon,
to remind us that the angel of death did *not* pass over Jesus:
that the lamb of God was not spared
but was sacrificed for our sakes
so that the power of sin might not penetrate
the sanctuary of our hearts.

On this Passover night
we remember how Judas *betrayed* his Lord with a kiss;
and how, on this night some 2000 years ago,
Jesus was betrayed by the worst in us all.

Our Passover prayer as Christians reminds us that
all of us, not just a few, but all of us have failed
in smaller or larger ways,
and that all of us, not just a few,
are in need of the deliverance offered to us
in the sacrifice of our paschal lamb,
Jesus, who takes away the sins of the world.

Our Passover sacrifice is Jesus
who remains with us in the bread and cup of the eucharist.
The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke
recount for us the story of what Jesus did
with the unleavened bread and the blessing cup of Passover
at his last supper.

But the gospel of John tells the tale of the supper
with no reference to the food served at that meal,
but rather with the scene of Jesus washing the feet of his friends.

The master washes the servants' feet
and instructs them to do the same for one another.
As surely as the Lord told us to break bread and bless a cup
in memory of him,
so does he command us to be servants of one another.

Recognizing our own need for deliverance,
we gather for this Passover meal of eucharist,
and we carry out the instruction Jesus gave us,
that we who would share in the supper of the Lamb
must first wash one another's feet...

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