

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

April 9, 2009

Maundy Thursday 2009

In the name of our ever creating, ever redeeming, ever sustaining God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tonight is the start of our unique Christian story. But our story doesn't come out of the blue. No gold tablets are found buried somewhere that tell us who we are and where we came from. Our beginnings are really the continuation of the story of an ever creating God who blesses God's people so that we might be a blessing to others. It grows out of the story of a God who acts to liberate God's people – the story of the Passover that we heard in our reading from the Book of Exodus. It is a story of an evening that led to a Covenant with God, just as tonight's story will also lead to a Covenant with God.

The captive Israelite people cried to the Heavens for justice and God responded. It is a story that has two sides to it: one side celebrates liberation and the promise of new and different life; the other side is a story of blood, suffering, death and grief. We can celebrate the freedom that Moses leads his people to but we still have to look at the deaths of those first born children, the drowning of the soldiers and the horses in the Sea of Reeds and the grief that must have long rested over Egypt.

There is a great Biblical truth being told here. When a society allows itself to become oppressors, it contains within itself the seeds of destruction that will fall

most heavily on the innocent. The Hebrew Scriptures teach that lesson. Treat the aliens in your midst well, they advise, for you also were once strangers in a foreign land. When we lived in New Jersey, we always went to our Jewish neighbors for Passover Seder. During the meal the prayers reminded us several times – “treat the foreigner in your midst well for you, too, were once strangers in a foreign land.” This year when I hear that, I think of the 30 or so hard working people I saw in plastic handcuffs with their heads bowed low because they were being treated like dangerous criminals. They were for the most part Hispanic - the people who prepare our food, wash our dishes and make our beds.

The prophets always admonish the nations of Israel and Judea to be just in their business dealings and merciful to the poor. Time and again these warnings were ignored and eventually both nations fell. This year when I read those biblical warnings I think of Bernie Maddoff and I think of our financial institutions engaged in foolish and predatory practices while our government sat on its hands.

Jesus didn't have to be a mind reader to know that his death was close at hand. After all, he had arrived in Jerusalem on the back of an ass leading a ragtag procession of the poor that mocked the presumptuous glory of Pontius Pilot's arrival at the other end of the city. He had caused consternation and a public disturbance at the Temple amidst the crowds of holiday pilgrims streaming into the city in pilgrimage from all corners of the Roman Empire. This was done in full view of the soldiers and the Temple Priests who owed their jobs to the Romans. It didn't help that the holiday being celebrated was Passover – the story of liberation from foreign oppression.

Jesus should be heading for the hills. But he doesn't He stays willingly and obediently with his people. He has lessons to teach. Lies are defeated only by truth.

Hatred is defeated only by forgiveness and reconciliation. Violence is defeated only by compassion. So he assumes voluntarily the role of Pascal lamb.

He strips off his outer garment and ties a towel around his waist. The teacher now acts like the lowliest foreign slave and kneels before his disciples to wash the filth from the streets off their feet. It is a cleansing ritual of significance in his society. He even kneels before the one whom he knows will betray him in a few hours. All are cleansed and forgiven as Jesus prepares to share his final meal and final teachings with them – all except the one who has refused the forgiveness freely offered.

Before he starts the meal he commands that they should also do as he has done. He stays with his community knowing that a community can only exist when based on forgiveness and compassion. Jesus, the Pascal lamb, will live this out in the coming hours.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus institutes the Eucharist at the Last Supper. In our liturgy tonight we join the two as we do each time we celebrate Holy Communion together as a community. Before the feast, we confess publicly our fault and ask forgiveness. We pass the peace acknowledging that our love for one another exceeds our differences and disappointments. Forgiven and cleansed we join in breaking bread together.

Amen.