

Maundy Thursday 2020

Exodus 12: 1-4, 11-14, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Mathew 26:17-30

Fragments....

‘What makes this night different from all other nights?’ That’s the question our Jewish brother and sisters ask in the Passover liturgy, this week – and we too should ask the same thing. ‘What is this night?’ This Thursday, this night with the Passover moon sailing above us, just as it did *that* night, the night that we remember. Two things: First, it is the night marked out as ‘the night on which he was betrayed’. Not the night he was arrested. Not the night he was brought before the high priest. Not the night he was taken to the Roman governor, or the night he was manacled by the Roman soldiers. It is the night, as Paul writes, on which he was betrayed. And all the gospels say the same thing. The accounts are shot through with ‘The betrayal’. ‘One of you will betray me.’ ‘The one who betrays me is with me, and his hand on the table’ ‘Arise, my betrayer is at hand!’

Betrayal is a deeply personal act. It involves the betrayer in a terrible decision, and it involves the betrayed in a terrible anguish. And as we think of The Betrayer, this particular night, we recognise what we might term, the mystery of the terrible vocation of Judas. Mary said ‘yes’ to God in her vocation to bring the Christ to birth, Judas said ‘yes’ to evil in his to bring the Christ to death. This is a conundrum. Something we can’t easily understand. But it’s not a new thing. When we look at the Hebrew Scriptures we them shot through with a kind of ‘wrestling’ to bring and keep the question of evil *under* the sovereignty of God. The ten plagues, including the terrible killing of the first born of Egypt, which hammered at Pharoah to ‘let my people go’. The apparent ‘permission’ for sickness and trouble to afflict Job and his family. The psalms with the cry of anguish to God: ‘You have put me in the depths of the Pit.’ The Jewish faith has always sought to be deeply integrative, holding together light and darkness, weal and woe, in some way, under the sovereign purposes of God.

And I think it may not be too great a leap to view the virus which is so afflicting the world in the same way. This tiny mechanism has thrown a spanner into the world’s works and ground it to a halt. It’s causing immense pain on every level of life. And we believe that God through his Spirit is working with the people of the world, to understand it, and to overcome it. But we can also see that this tiny mechanism, which has ground us to a halt, has the power to be transformative....Here is the mystery. This part of the fallen creation, which is dis-ordered, and against which God is fighting with us, has nevertheless the potential to further the purposes of God. Can a virus have a vocation? All parts of the creation lie under the sovereign power of the Creator.

Some words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis 75 years ago today – words about ‘a world gone wrong’:

‘The world lives by the blessing of God and of the righteous, and thus has a future. Blessing means laying one’s hands on something and saying, ‘Despite everything, you belong to God’. This is what we do with the world that inflicts such suffering on us. We do not abandon it; we do not repudiate, despise or condemn it. Instead we *call it back to God*, we give it hope, we lay our hand on it and say: May God’s blessing come upon you, may God renew you; be blessed, world created by God, you who belong to your Creator and Redeemer.’

Secondly, again, 'What is this night?' It's the night when the Jewish people stood and ate a hurried meal, 'their loins girded, sandals on their feet and staff in their hands'. It's the night of the terrible death of the first born and of the escape from Egypt. It's the night Jesus had supper with his friends, not a supper like any other, a relaxed affair, - but a supper-on-a-journey. Eaten in the context of approaching conflict and struggle. In a sense, eaten with his loins girded, sandals ready to go. Eaten perhaps with a pit of fear in his stomach. And down the ages the meal, this meal, tonight's meal, the meal when we remember him, has been eaten as a meal-on-a-journey. A meal often eaten in the context of conflict and pain and suffering: comforting – but not comfortable. The followers of Jesus, undergoing persecution, meeting secretly, including today, breaking bread together, 'until he comes'. Priests and people, confused and bewildered in the years of the Black Death, yet celebrating the Eucharist, 'until he comes'. My grandfather, a chaplain in the first world war, upturning a packing case in the blood and the mud of the trenches, and making an altar, 'until he comes'. And we, tonight, gathered here on zoom – and also let us remember – right across the globe, not comfortable but comforted, remembering with thanksgiving Jesus 'until he comes'. 'Even so, Come Lord, Come!'