

The readings we hear on Maundy Thursday each year are always the same. The account in Exodus of the first Passover and the promise that God will protect God's people, the record in Corinthians of the account of the Last Supper in the first century, which is almost word for word the same practice we maintain 2000 years later, and then our Gospel reading which is the account of the washing of the disciples feet and then the command to 'love one another'. Someone recently asked me why we do the same thing over and over again – doesn't it get boring? And I could honestly answer 'no'. Each time we encounter these stories – each time we re-enact and share in these traditions we get a glimpse of ourselves – and because we are changing; our understanding and encounter with God also changes.

We are constantly asking questions of ourselves, of God and of each other – and as such we continue to grow and learn – and so too does the community of faith as we reflect each other's stories and questions.

The story of the Passover in Exodus is a very painful story to hear because at one level it is the

story of genocide – but it is also a story of hope and rescue. It is a hard story hear, and it is even a harder story to understand. Why was such pain, such horror required?

Terrance Fretheim, visiting Old Testament Lecturer at Luther Seminary reminds us that to engage with this story we need to understand both its historical, literary and sacramental context¹.

*This Passover text is a part of the larger narrative Exodus 1:1-15:21, a story of liberation from bondage in Egypt. This literary context is important. The story of the ten plagues is "interrupted" by Exodus 12:1-28. In Exodus 11:1 God had announced "one more plague" upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians. The reader expects the tenth plague to follow immediately, but it is delayed. Between the announcement and the event, there is an extensive liturgical discussion regarding Passover/Unleavened Bread. Fretheim suggests that the tenth plague is presented not simply as historical event but also as liturgical event (merged in 12:50-51). The liturgy is set in place before the event occurs and so the event **is** liturgy, the first celebration of Passover. This means that the liturgical event is as much "act of God" as is the historical event. That is, Passover is not simply a*

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3207

time of commemoration, it has a sacramental character: in and through this particular ritual - God acted and acts in a saving way. As God delivered Israel in ancient times, so also in every celebration of Passover God works salvation for the believing community.

It is a sign of the action of God's grace, historically and now.

While this may make the story more palatable for our modern ears – it also does something else. It also places the events of the Last Supper also in the context of a liturgical event. Jesus too introduces a liturgical practice to his followers that will continue as an act of covenant and promise for us event today. And in Jesus act too we have the revelation of God in our midst – an image that God has acted, and continues to act within creation.

Sometimes for all our passion and commitment to God, we forget that God is living, and acting now – even if it isn't always how we would like it to be. The challenge for us in this triduum – the next three days of Holy Week and Easter – is to be aware of God acting – not just in the stories that we hear – but also being vigilant for how God is at work now in our midst, and in the world.

If we want a glimpse of what we might be looking for, perhaps we can look at the actions of Jesus. One of the most telling verses in our passage from John tonight is verse 3 ‘Jesus knowing all had been given into his own hands’. We can only assume that Jesus knew what was coming, who would betray him, that he would be alone when it mattered most. Knowing these things about his friends and disciples Jesus doesn’t rant – rather he chooses an act of love. The action of God is not to respond with aggression, but in grace. For those who knew the historical context of the Passover in the first centuries will have made this link of the presence of God’s grace. Jesus washes the feet of those who are his disciples, but also the feet of those who will reject him. It is a powerful image of intimacy, but also an image of responding to evil and pain.

I was reminded by another commentator² this week of another reflection on this passage written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Bonhoeffer warns against allowing ourselves to fall into contempt for humanity:

Whoever despises another human being will never be able to make anything of him. Nothing of what we despise in another is itself foreign to us ... The

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3204

only fruitful relation to human beings -- particularly to the weak among them -- is love, that is, the will to enter into and to keep community with them. God did not hold human beings in contempt but became human for their sake³.

In the face of the weakness and pain of others, when we want to see the worst of humanity – God reveals the possibility of love and grace. This is what we can see in the acts we will share in tonight – in the washing of each other’s feet, in the sharing of the Last Supper together; in the reminder from Jesus to ‘love one another’; in the walking with Jesus to the garden and in the sitting and praying together with Jesus for the grace of God to be revealed in the world. All these actions are part of remembering the story, but they are equally about how we ourselves live as people of love now and how we honour and recognise God’s action now.

Love is at the heart of all that is happening – for it is Love which God longs for us to welcome and experience in his Kingdom – such a simple word and such a difficult action for us to embrace.

Jesus commands us to love - but True love cannot be commanded because true love first requires

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 44-5.

moving beyond one's own desire's and even our own self perceptions. This is quite difficult. We are often drawn to love those who will buy into our own justifications. But the love of God's Kingdom is beyond this - because we are all drawn - just as we are. All comes from God and all will return to God.

As we observe these most solemn days - may we have the courage not only to love one another and ourselves - but stand up for the justice of the God, responding to his call on our lives bringing all to the glory of God. Amen.