

Homily: Holy Thursday, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020

The Church has a long memory. Tonight we're invited to cast our minds back – nearly three and a half thousand years, in fact, to a night of high drama in Egypt. A night of fear and terror, yet also a night of hope and expectation. A night that would bring death, and a night that would bring freedom. It was the night of the Passover, the great act by which God would liberate His people from slavery in Egypt.

That night, as we heard in the first reading, the people of Israel had to gather in their homes. A lamb was to be sacrificed, and its blood was to be smeared around the doorway of the house. Strange as it seems to us, gruesome as it might seem to us, this was vital, because it meant protection for the people. For that night, the angel of death would visit Egypt with a devastating plague – and every first-born son would die, from the palace of Pharaoh to the humblest dwelling of the people. But when the angel of death saw the blood of the lamb around the doorway of a house, that house would be spared. The angel would pass over the house, so that no harm would come to anyone in that place. So it was vital that the people stayed in the house – outside, there was danger – inside, protected by the blood of the lamb, the people were safe from death.

This event – as alien as it might seem to us – has become strangely familiar in recent weeks. We know we too must stay home – outside, we are reminded – there is danger. To protect life we must stay in our houses, just as the people of Israel did that night. But this was not a night of fear for the Hebrews: the first reading makes it clear that this was to be a day of festival, and for ever. The Passover was the liberation of God's people – because of that plague, Pharaoh finally gave them their freedom. They had escaped death in the plague, and now they escaped slavery. Life and freedom were God's gifts to them.

These gifts are celebrated each year by the Jewish people, and – as faithful Jews – our Lord and His disciples gathered together in the upper room on the night of the Last Supper, to share the Passover meal. They would recall how God had saved His people from death in Egypt and freed them from slavery, and they knew that in celebrating these great gifts, God renewed them each year. But at the Last Supper, God had an even greater gift in store. This year, the blood of the lamb would be no ordinary lamb, but the Lamb of God, Jesus, whose Blood was shed on the cross. The sacrifice of the Lamb would save the people from death and bring freedom, but these gifts were not just for one time or place: Jesus, the Lamb of God, would save us from death for ever, and offer us true freedom from slavery to sin, to live for Him in love. As in Egypt, the first-born son would die – but not in every family – just one man, the first-born son of Mary, the only-begotten Son of God – He would die, so that His people might be freed.

In Egypt, God had given the people that familiar message: stay in your homes, and you will be safe. Do not go outside, where the angel of death lurks. But tonight, when the meal is finished, Jesus does go outside: He goes to the Mount of Olives, to the Garden of Gethsemane, where the betrayer is lurking, the soldiers are waiting, death is looming for Him. He goes out knowing full well what will happen to Him. He willingly goes to face death,

because this is how the people will be saved and given their freedom. He leaves behind the safety of the house, the upper room, just as He once left behind the safety of heaven to come and live as one of us; and tonight, He will begin His final journey to the Cross.

Jesus' willingness to go out to His death is an act of self-giving – the ultimate act of self-giving. A man can have no greater love than to lay down His life for His friends. Now, as St John remarks in the Gospel, He shows how perfect His love is. And this self-giving is seen in other ways, too: Jesus gives Himself in loving service, stooping to wash the feet of His disciples; and He gives Himself in the Eucharist, His own Body and Blood. At this Passover meal, the food is the Lamb of God. Tomorrow, Jesus will give Himself for His people on the Cross; tonight, He gives Himself to His people in the Eucharist. A life spent in service of others is crowned with His greatest acts of self-giving, for the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. Washing feet, dying on the Cross: serving, and giving His life as our ransom.

This was hardly in the disciples' plan, but it was in the plan of God. It's so often the way: we want to avoid suffering at all costs, but God knows that suffering is sometimes the price we pay for love. And love must always come first. Once, when Jesus told the disciples that He would die on the Cross, Peter protested; now he protests when Jesus bends down to wash his feet. Jesus replies, "At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand." I wonder if those words rang in Peter's ears when Jesus was arrested, crucified and buried: "At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand." Later – only when the Lord has risen – will everything become clear.

We sometimes find ourselves, like Peter, wondering what God is doing. Later, the Lord promises, you will understand. But in the meantime, before the reasons for our suffering are made clear to us, let's keep our faith strong by remembering all the things that God has already done for us. Let's recall the saving acts of Jesus which we celebrate in these days. Let's call to mind His self-giving, His service, His perfect love. "Do this as a memorial of me", He commands us tonight. We are not to forget. And when we remember, when we do this as His memorial, the gift is renewed. He comes to us. His Body and Blood is made present. His sacrifice is made present. His self-giving love is made present. The Lamb of God tonight gives Himself for the salvation of the world, to free us from sin and death. The Church indeed has a long memory – a memory of events which took place many years ago; but events that are remembered, celebrated and made present tonight and in these days of the Lord's suffering and death. Events of the past, brought into the present, and opening for us the door to eternity.

Fr Andrew

