

Maundy Thursday C

Maundy is kind of a silly-sounding word. They say it's from the Latin *mandatum* – commandment. The commandment of course is a new one, Jesus says, “Love one another as I have loved you.” But Jesus is always leaving us. Perhaps he should have said “Leave one another as I have left you.” And how does he leave? With forgiveness, gratitude and a promise to return. So that is how we are to love, with forgiveness, gratitude and a promise to return tomorrow. Anyone who has kids knows they are always leaving, and no matter how mature and well-adjusted we are, there is always a voice screaming out from our hearts: “NO, DON'T GO!!” Leavetaking is the price of love.

In Exodus 12, we hear about the institution of the Passover, at once a miracle of salvation and new life for the Israelites, and a grisly sentence passed on the Egyptians. We can no longer condone wholesale acts of violence, no matter whom they supposedly benefit; the violence itself has toxic consequences that poison the very souls of the would-be liberated. Witness the so-called holy acts of modern day terrorists that are anything but godly. With each of these horrors, those who perpetrate them move further and further from any alignment with cosmic goodness, and thus from God.

In Islam, the feast of Tabaski includes also the killing of a lamb, whose meat is shared with others, especially the poor. The feast commemorates Abraham's willingness to go to any lengths in order to reconcile himself with the will of God. Likewise, the Passover dictates that an annual review take place. Are we Israelites or are we Egyptians? For us, the question is figurative, but no less incisive and vital. Will we follow the Lord God, or will we continue in an economy of enslaving and being enslaved by the forces of the world? If we commit ourselves to God and touch our doorposts and lintels with the blood of the lamb – see how this looks – then we are can move freely into life. If we do not, we stay trapped, enslaved to our worldly power and wealth and desire, where we will always stand to lose that which we value most, our firstborn. It is no longer about Egypt vs Israel; it is life vs death.

St Paul says to examine ourselves. This is the act of a Christian life. The new covenant in Jesus, that provides the transformative blood and body – once an actual lamb, even earlier and actual child – this covenant dictates and promises that we examine ourselves as best we can and we will be well, no matter our hardship or suffering. If we become disciples by inquiring after the Word of God in Jesus the Christ and following him on the way, we become true apostles by looking to self-examination and accepting complete forgiveness when we have fallen short of perfection – as we always must.

Jesus is both the example and the inspiration: at once our role model and our mystical, unreachable, ineffable vision of God. Like us, he has secrets, told only to the most intimate of his friends. He tells “the disciple whom he loved,” ‘Watch this. I will dip the bread and give it to the one who will betray me.’ And he does just that, with no one else the wiser. Why did not the “one whom he loved” shout out, ‘Stop him, you fools!’? Because it was their secret. Like us, Jesus thrives on his hope, that the fulfillment of his destiny is good. As with us, Jesus needs great courage to maintain this hope in the face of so much evidence to the contrary.

So we live with our desire for God. It can be a compulsion, habitual and immoderate, but with far nicer side effects than other addictions. It can also be devastating and murderous in the extreme. But if we take to heart the new commandment this Maundy Thursday: “Love one another as I have loved you” especially in our leaving, with forgiveness, gratitude and a promise to return, we will indeed grow in hope – the trusting kind, not the merely wishful – as we watch and wait and come to believe.