

Sermon for Maundy Thursday, March 28, 2024

I have read these readings many, many times, but this year something new struck me. For the first time, I saw a theme going through all the readings, the theme of belonging. All these readings are about belonging, how God's people belong to God and also belong to each other. They are a community, where each of them belongs.

We read about the Passover on Maundy Thursday because each of the gospels equates Jesus' self-offering on the cross with the offering of the Passover lamb. St. John, especially, repeats this theme in many places and St. Paul develops it, too. That Jesus is the Passover Lamb, the Paschal lamb. And we usually say, "That takes away the sin of the world." But you know, the paschal lamb wasn't a sin offering. There were sin offerings, guilt offerings, whole burnt offerings and offerings of well-being, all of which could involve lambs. The first 3 were for atonement for sin. The offerings of well-being were mostly like saying grace, because the person offering it ate it with their family, apart from the inner fat.

But the Passover Lamb was different. The Passover Lamb was eaten by the Israelites, the night the angel of death moved over Egypt, killing the first born. The Israelites put the lamb's blood on their door posts and lintels to show the angel that the people inside were the Lord's people, and so the angel would pass over their house. And it has been used ever since to commemorate how the Lord rescued Israel from Egypt and made them his people. It's a sign of belonging to the Lord.

It was also food for the journey. They ate it quickly, with quickly prepared unleavened bread, because they were in a hurry. That very night they were driven out of Egypt and the lamb they'd eaten kept them going. Food for the journey. They also took the bread dough and could quickly cook it on a fire, since they didn't have to wait for it to rise.

So you can see the connection between that and the Lord's Supper, what we now call communion or the Eucharist. We don't use a lamb, but the bread and wine we take are a sign of our belonging to Christ, and we do it always in memory of how the Lord saved us, not from Egypt but from our own sinful, worldly nature. And it is not just a memento of this, but it also increases our belonging, because when we take the bread and wine, we are taking the body and blood of Christ, his life becomes our life. We become one with him in a very deep way. And it also provides food for us on our spiritual journey through life.

And in both cases, you know, this is not an individual thing. Moses didn't eat the Passover alone. Everyone was to eat within their family group or their neighbour group. And the whole congregation of Israel was to eat it together, at the same time, in the same way, to commemorate their communal salvation, as the people of God.

It is the same with us. Did you know an Anglican priest cannot celebrate communion alone? There must be someone else there, at least one other person. In some ways, the most important word of the prayer of consecration is the Amen at the end, said by the people. If there is no one to say "Amen," nothing happens.

The Lord's Supper is a communal meal, shared by the whole Body of Christ gathered together. It is not just about an individual being part of Christ. It's about us as a community being part of Christ, and therefore also part of each other. We belong to each other. I belong to you. We all have a claim on each other as closer than family, as part of the same body.

St. John's gospel, alone of the gospels, does not actually tell us about the communion. Possibly he thought that the other 3 gospel writers and St. Paul had done a good enough job of that. Possibly he thought that talking about Jesus being the bread of life earlier in his gospel got the point across well enough. But he alone tells us about the foot washing. This is another sacrament of belonging, though it isn't listed among the 7 sacraments of the church. I've never been sure why not, except that perhaps people preferred eating bread and wine to actually washing each other's feet or letting others wash their feet.

Jesus washes his disciples' feet before the meal. If you've been watching *The Chosen*, you'll have noticed two things: the streets were pretty dirty – dust, animal droppings, who knows what else? – and everyone washed their feet before entering a house. If they were rich, they had a slave to do that for them. If not, they did their own. Jews were very careful about cleanliness, washing feet, washing hands, washing dishes thoroughly. And here Jesus washes their feet, the role of a slave.

Simon Peter objects and says he is not going to let his master wash his feet. Jesus says that if Peter doesn't let him do this, he will have no share with him. Jesus himself says this is an important sign of belonging to him. Letting Jesus serve us is an important sign of belonging to Jesus. Accepting the service and gifts Jesus gives us, rather than thinking we don't need them, or being too proud to accept them. And then Jesus tells them to do the same for each other, follow his example of washing each other's feet.

This could be a symbol of a number of things. But primarily, it shows that it is our responsibility in the church to serve each other. Mutual love and service. And, conversely, to be served. You can't serve someone if they, like Peter, reject your service. We should have the humility in the church to allow ourselves to be served as well as to serve. That's what makes us a community of mutual love and service, helping and being helped.

When I was doing my chaplaincy training we studied this passage. I remember saying to the group that I kind of liked washing people's feet but I didn't like having my feet washed. Our teacher said, "That's because you like to think of yourself in the role of Jesus, not the role of one of his followers." As usual, she totally nailed it. Although washing someone's feet is serving them, it's also putting myself into the role of Jesus, you know, the Saviour, the Wise one, the Messiah.

But allowing our feet to be washed makes us feel vulnerable. We're not really worried about our gimpy feet – after all, everyone has them and most of us wear open toed sandals all summer. We're worried about the fact that if we accept service from someone, it's an acknowledgement of our weakness, our vulnerability, our need. And we like to hide those things from other people. It's uncomfortable to accept service as well as give it. It makes us accept our limitations, our humanity. And so, it's really good for us to do this.

In a few moments, we're going to re-enact both the footwashing and the Lord's Supper. We are going to re-enact the events of Jesus' last night, starting with the meal, and the reading of Scripture that went with it at the Passover, and moving to the new things Jesus initiated, the foot washing and the communion, and then following over to the church where we read of the Garden of Gethsemane and re-enact the disciples fleeing in darkness and abandoning Jesus, forgetting that they belong to him and to one another, and running away, saving their own skins. Not for long. They remembered and came together again before Easter morning. But in that moment, they panicked and ran.

But we re-enact these things to remind us that we, too, belong to Christ and to one another. That we, too, are called to love each other, to serve each other, to accept each other's service, to share with each other, to be one with each other. To remind ourselves that we, too, are imperfect, fallible human beings, who often run away from belonging, run away from Christ, run away from each other, especially if we think it might hurt. And then to remind ourselves to come together again in humility and love, to forgive one another and serve one another and love one another once again.