Re–Imagining Holy Week

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

We are in the middle of Holy Week. In Christian tradition, this week is the climax of the season of Lent, a time for Christians to reflect more deeply on our faith. It is a week of darkness and celebration, a week of shadows and light. Above all, it is a week of service.

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday. Jesus enters Jerusalem in "a triumphal procession." But it was hardly triumphal. It was a ragged procession of perhaps a couple dozen people cheering Jesus as he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. In fact, as John Dominic Crossan says, "it is an anti–triumphal entry," a public demonstration against Roman imperial power. Jesus challenges and mocks the imperial understanding of power and triumph.

Holy Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday are days of increasing conflict with the authorities in Jerusalem. Jesus clears the Temple, overturning the tables of the moneychangers. The authorities challenge Jesus' teaching and his authority and begin to think of how they might get rid of this troublemaker. They find a traitor among Jesus' followers.

The primary act of Maundy Thursday is an act of service. "Maundy" comes from the Latin word "mandatum", which means command. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." It hearkens back to the Great Commandment to love God and to love one another. Jesus commands us that the heart of faith is not glory, but service. He kneels before his friends and washes their feet, doing the work of slaves and servants.

Many churches re–enact this scene as members serve their neighbours by washing their feet. It is an intimate and powerful act as we remember our calling to be servants.

In the story, Jesus washes feet during the "Last Supper," so churches will also celebrate Eucharist. It is the feast of thanksgiving and remembering. The Eucharist can mean many things, but at its heart, at this meal we understand that all are welcome as equal partners in the household and economy of God to celebrate who we are and whose we are.

Good Friday is the day of crucifixion. Imperial Rome flexed its might by executing another rabble rouser, one of thousands of crosses which littered the landscape. Many Christians consider this to be the central day of their faith. For them, the cross is the whole meaning of God's redemptive activity in the world— "Jesus died for my sins."

This week ends in silence on Holy Saturday, a day of darkness, confusion, and uncertainty. The disciples are in hiding, afraid of the authorities, their hopes dashed.

Now let me pose a question. It comes from a reflection posted a few weeks ago by Diana Butler Bass about the story of the prodigal son and the overwhelming generosity of his father when he comes home. "Look at all that food," she writes. "This story about a father and two sons … begins with a complaint about Jesus's dinner guests— 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' The younger son takes a job feeing pigs, winds up eating pig food, and decent people refuse to feed him. The whole story changes when he cries out, 'I am starving!' He goes home to his father because he is hungry."

Bass asks, "What if Christians shifted the spiritual import of the Passion away from Good Friday toward Maundy Thursday. What if we emphasized the Table more than the Cross? What would Christianity be like if it saw the central act of Jesus's last week as a meal instead of an execution?"

This question has haunted me ever since. Imagine what it would be like if the Thursday meal were to become the heart of our Christian faith rather than the Friday crucifixion. What if the

Thursday act of service and feasting act became more important than the imperial flexing of its muscle in crucifixion?

How would faith change if we said that the heart of our faith is "Jesus teaches us to serve others" rather than "Jesus died for my sins"? How would the church be different if we found the heart of our relationship with God and others in this meal of equality and mutuality, based in humble service to one another and unconditional forgiveness? At this meal, all are welcome, regardless of orientation, status, or class. We might even be accused of being gluttons and eating with "outsiders," as Jesus was. Everyone will be fed; no one will go hungry, for it is a meal of plenty, of the best, of conversation and laughter and joy and celebration.

At such a revolutionary meal, all are equal and none will be turned away. Indeed, Paul imagined this kind of new social order in Galatians 3 where he writes, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." All human distinctions are erased in God's economy, in God's new world, in God's way of ordering life.

Equally important in our individualistic world in North America, such a vision would be about "us" rather than about "me." You can't feast by yourself. You can only do so with others.

Could we re–imagine our faith this way? We may even participate in this Palm Sunday parade which challenges the imperial order held by the world. It would no longer be about who's in and who's out depending on what you believe. Rather, in this radical meal of equality and service, all the old structures of this world—social division, hoarding, brokenness, inhumanity—would be overcome. As Bass observes, "the Jesus supper overcomes social divides, heals brokenness with reconciliation, and treats everyone at the table with dignity."

This way of re–imagining Christian faith would be a foretaste of God's will "done on earth as in heaven."