

The Reverend Theo Robinson's Sermon for Maundy Thursday, April 2 Exodus 12:1-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 - "A Lasting Presence"

O God, may the finger of your Spirit stir through the clutter of my words to point to a new understanding. Amen.

Holy Week is celebrated by both Jews and Christians alike - for similar reasons but with very different undertones. In tonight's account in Exodus, God tells Moses and Aaron how to combat the 10th plague. Here's a reminder of that plague, found in Exodus 11:

Moses said, "Thus says the LORD: About midnight I will go out through Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again. But not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites—not at people, not at animals—so that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel."

In tonight's reading from Exodus 12, God instructs Moses and Aaron to have each family slaughter a lamb and spread its blood on their doorways. By doing so, they would be telling God which houses belong to the Israelites, and thus, by default, which belong to the Egyptians. It says in line 13, "The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt."

For the Jewish community, this week is one of celebration that commemorates the exodus of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. The Hebrew word *pesach* (pay-sock) refers to the ancient Passover sacrifice, known as the Paschal Lamb; it is also said to refer to the idea that God "passed over" the houses of the Jews during the 10th plague on the Egyptians, the slaying of the first born. The holiday is ultimately a celebration of freedom, and the story of the exodus from Egypt is a powerful metaphor that is appreciated not only by Jews, but by people of other faiths as well.

Passover is one of the most well-known Jewish holidays, as much for its connection to Jewish redemption and the figure of Moses as for its ties with Christian history. The Last Supper has been described as a Passover seder, a Jewish ritual feast that marks the beginning of the Jewish holiday of Passover.

According to the Synoptic Gospels, it is on Thursday evening that Jesus, in the upper room with his disciples, celebrates Passover and institutes the Lord's Supper. The Gospel of John, however, speaks of the Thursday supper as the day before Passover, linking Jesus' death on Friday with the Passover sacrifices. And so, while Jewish people are celebrating the joy of their freedom from slavery, this week, for Christians, is a week of sadness as we come closer to the end Jesus' life. In the end, Christians will celebrate their freedom and forgiveness from sin, but the build-up to Easter Sunday is more sombre than joyful.

Tonight is an especially sombre night as Jesus lays the foundation of his departure even while his disciples are oblivious to the fact. There was no human reason why Jesus had to die. To the general public, he was more helpful than harmful. But to the Roman leadership, Jesus was a real pain.

Jesus was a small-town peasant in a Roman province far from the centers of political and religious power. People in such circumstances rarely threatened Rome in any serious way. A miracle-working Jewish prophet and teacher would not have posed much of a conventional threat to such power and brutality. For his own part, Jesus never took up arms, nor did he encourage his followers to do so. But while Jesus did not exercise conventional kinds of political authority, his actions and his message included threats to the status quo. Chief among his threatening actions? Jesus could draw a crowd. The gospels report that great crowds followed him. When he entered Jerusalem during the last week of his life, he entered to local fanfare. The popularity of Jesus, combined with the gathering of perhaps hundreds of thousands of pilgrims in Jerusalem for Passover, would have made Roman authorities very nervous. It was this nervousness that flamed the desire to pull Jesus from hiding and set him on trial before Pilate.

Jesus knew this was all going to happen. He knew that his time on earth was coming to an end. He even knew who was going to hand him to Roman authorities. And he knew that the ending wasn't going to be a pleasant one. So why didn't he tell anyone? Why did he turn towards the end instead of running the other way? Cryptic as always, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, declares that one of them will betray him, and tells them that he will only be with them a short while longer. And as usual, the whole situation goes over the disciples' heads.

If you knew you were going to die, wouldn't you tell your best friends? Wouldn't you want you their support? Or at least give them a chance to say goodbye? Jesus didn't do any of that, but he did impart some pretty heavy last lessons to his disciples.

First, he delivers to them a new commandment – to love one another. The reading says, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” While the Romans thought Jesus was a rebel-rouser, he really was, in fact, a teacher in the art of love. In all of his miracles, parables, and lessons, the underlying fact is that all can be done and achieved through the love of one another and of the stranger.

Second, Jesus imparted a lesson of remembrance. Jesus may not have openly declared to his people what was about to happen, but he wanted his disciples to remember him and the lessons that he had been teaching.

And so, much in the Jewish tradition of seder, Jesus and his disciples had one final supper together.

The Last Supper is one of the foundational pieces of the Christian faith. To accept the Eucharist in remembrance and thanks to the life and death of Jesus is to openly declare yourself one of his disciples. It is what makes this night so special, despite its darkness. Similar to the Jewish celebration of freedom from Egyptian slavery, tonight we, as Christians, celebrate our freedom to declare our love and faith in Jesus and reveal our willingness to follow in his footsteps.

Feel the quiet power these words: Take this bread and eat it. It is my body. As you eat it, remember me. Take this wine and drink it. It is my blood. As you drink it, remember me.

Almost 20 years ago, I read out loud tonight's Corinthians passage aloud for the first time, my lips sounding out the words of our Eucharistic prayers. I felt a presence in those words, a presence that I felt physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I heeded the words of the Messiah, and the presence I felt, and became his disciple. Those words changed my life.

Tonight is a powerful night. It was for the disciples 2000 years ago. It was for me all those years ago. It is for us tonight. As we witness the stripping of our worship space and go into the darkness, there remains a presence. One that will remain with us until Jesus comes to us once again.

Amen.