

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Holy Thursday (Year A)
6th April 2023

Homily for Holy Thursday 2023

Jesus and his disciples have come to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. It is hardly possible for us to grasp how crowded and chaotic the city would have been. The celebration of Passover at the time of Jesus was focussed on the city, and specifically on the Temple. The lamb for Passover had to be sacrificed in the Temple, and the sacrifice was completed when the lamb was eaten. Since the destruction of the Temple Passover has become a family meal, presided over by the head of the household, but it was not so in Jesus day or in the centuries leading up to it. There were two parts of the Passover celebration: the lamb was sacrificed in the Temple by the priests, and then the ordinary people took part in that sacrifice by eating the Passover meal. Sacrifice and meal went hand in hand.

The instructions for the celebration of Passover, found in the Book of Exodus are very clear. We have heard some of them read tonight. A few verses further on, this is what we read:

"It was a night of watching by the LORD, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; so this same night is a night of watching kept to the LORD by all the people of Israel throughout their generations." (Exodus 12.42)

The night of Passover was a night of watching. It was a night of watching then, and it remains a night of watching for the Jewish people until the days of Christ, and to the present day. On that first Passover day, the people knew that liberation was at hand. Their bags were packed, their unleavened bread was ready – there was no time to wait for it to prove; they had eaten the sacrificed lamb until nothing was left – they would be able to take nothing with them. They ate the meal hastily, with their sandals on their feet and their staffs in their hands, ready to go at a moment's notice (Exodus 12.11). They were watching. On that first night of watching the people of Israel were watching for the angel to pass over the land of Egypt and destroy the firstborn of the slavedrivers; they were watching for the signal to leave, watching for the moment that the Egyptians would say to them 'GO!'.

But Exodus does not just say the first Passover was to be a night of watching; it says that every successive Passover is also to be a night of watching 'throughout their generations'. It is to be a night of watching for all eternity. Long before the time of Christ the expectation had arisen that the Messiah would come on Passover night. That was the night on which the people had been freed from slavery in Egypt; that would also be the night on which the saving power of the Messiah would be seen. It was a night of watching. And that is the context in which Jesus celebrates the Last Supper with his disciples. He is the one for whom the people had been watching all these years.

It is in the light of this story that we celebrate this Mass of Holy Thursday. Jesus' disciples are watching, as Moses had told them. they were watching for the Messiah. What would Jesus do?

Would he reveal himself in glory on this night? Yes, but certainly not in the way which they had anticipated. First of all he strips away his outer garments and grovels on the floor to wash their feet. They were watching, but they didn't see that coming. Then he presides over the Passover meal and rebuilds it, so that now he has become the lamb to be sacrificed, he has become the offering that brings peace, he has become the food by which his friends join in the sacrifice. They were watching, but they didn't see that coming either.

All of these surprises come, in spite of it being a night of watching. But it is night of watching for us still. The Jewish people watched for the Messiah but were caught out when he came, because they were not expecting such humility (stretched on the ground, washing people's feet!); nor did they expect such self-gift, such self-sacrifice (offering himself for the salvation of the world). Even the most careful watchers can miss the sight they long for. Let us be a watchful people, then, alert for the presence of the Saviour. Let us watch out for him in places where humble service is needed, watch for the chances to encounter him where he is grovelling on the floor, where he is feeding the hungry, comforting the grieving, propping up the anxious and guiding the lost. If we watch for him in those places we will always meet him there, quietly at work

Let us also watch for him at the table of the Passover, at the altar on which he offers himself. We will certainly meet him if we watch for him among the givers, not among the takers. He will be found wherever people offer themselves for others, wherever the exhausted heart, moved once more by compassion, stirs itself for one more act of self-gift. And, on this night above all nights, let us watch for him in Gethsemane. There he is, deep in conversation with his Father; there he is, steeling himself for the greatest gift; there he is, getting ready to show us what it really means to be human.

This is to be a night of watching; we are to be a people who watch; we watch for the signs of Christ's presence, but we also watch for those places in which we are called to make him known, to make his presence felt, to be the washer of feet and the givers of self. May our celebration of this night sharpen our eyes so that we do not watch in vain.