

Maundy Thursday Reflection

I have always had a huge respect for the way our Jewish brothers and sisters combine faith, family and festivals. I have a particular love for Passover - that great festival of laughter and tears, celebration and storytelling in which the the great Exodus story of the release of the Israelite slaves from captivity is told as if the participants had actually been there.

Without wanting to steal another faith's traditions there is a way in which Passover has a Christian connection too. What we celebrate now as the Lord's table, or communion, began after all when Jesus sat with his friends 'on the night he was betrayed', for a Passover meal.

And so tonight, I'm going to invite you all to join with me in exploring some of the passover symbols and traditions and what they might mean to us as Christians in Holy Week. I do this respectfully as a way of celebrating our shared Judeo-Christian roots in the Exodus story.

I also think that we as Christians, in what feels like a time of isolation and exile, can learn from Jewish tradition and experience about ways of keeping our faith and our identity alive and real while staying at home.

On a technical note, for the geeks out there, many of the traditions I refer to developed out of the diaspora so we cannot be sure that this was the way Jesus celebrated passover.

A typical Passover meal begins when the candles are lit and a blessing is said.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe. We light these candles at the beginning of this festival, as a reminder that your word is a lamp for our feet and a light on our path.

For a passover meal, four cups are prepared and drunk during the meal with particular blessings. There are different traditions, but the first is the cup of blessing or freedom. We might take that and say something like

Blessed are you, O Lord our God who has given us life and brought us safely to this time of joy.

We then wash our hands - something we are all getting very used to, but which faith traditions have in fact been encouraging for thousands of years.

Then comes the first dipping - of a green vegetable which symbolises life. Spinach is what I have in, so spinach will do. A verse or two from song of

Solomon is read about the goodness and beauty of life - 'Arise my love and come away' the men might begin, 'My beloved is mine and I am his' the women might reply. "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death" they all agree.

In recognition that life also contains tears, the green is then dipped in the salt water and tasted with words such as

Blessed are you O Lord our God, Ruler of the universe who creates the fruit of the earth.

Unleavened bread is then broken, traditionally in three pieces. Although the meaning is different for Jewish people, we might want to consider the tri-fold nature of God - Father, Son and Spirit.

Already you may feel that some of this is familiar. The breaking of bread, the sharing of a cup. These things weren't new. What was new and different was Jesus' explanation.

Jewish families then have their younger members ask traditional questions about Passover. This is followed by shared retelling of the Passover story and something called Dayainu which is a way of expressing gratitude for each stage of God's goodness. I love this shared storytelling. Maybe that is something we can recover in this time of exile - ways of telling the stories of our faith amongst our families and our communities which give us all a sense of identity and purpose, and the strength to wait for the good which God promises.

I wonder too what stories might rise out of this pandemic - stories of sorrow and joy; of isolation and rescue; of sacrifice and love; of God's presence among us.

Other traditional passover symbols include a lamb shank to represent sacrifice in the temple, a baked egg as a symbol of mourning, something bitter like horseradish as a reminder of the harshness of slavery (I don't have horseradish in and we are all trying to minimise supermarket trips, so I've got mustard here). The horseradish is traditionally combined with sweet charoset - a mixture of things like apple, walnuts, honey which is combined to look a little bit like the straw used to make bricks for Egypt, and which is a symbol of hope. Taken together, the bitter and the sweet are the second dipping.

Other cups follow - the cup of judgement or wrath which is sometimes poured out without drinking. Jesus used this cultural language when he asked God to take this cup away from him in the garden of Gethsemene.

Then there is the third cup - the cup of redemption. In Jewish tradition this is traditionally reserved for Elijah, for whom an empty chair is left. Sometimes the cup is left un-drunk. But blessings are still said including one familiar to us as Christians

'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'.

Psalms are read - often Psalm 126 which says 'Those who sow with tears, will reap with songs of joy'. Songs of thanksgiving might be sung. And in the end the fourth cup, the cup of hope, is raised.

Both Christian and Jewish people believe that the story of God's redemption is not over, even if our understandings and interpretations are different. Jewish people believe the Messiah has yet to come. We believe he has come, but we still await his return.

All of us live in faith that God will not leave the world the way it is.

One of the reasons that Jewish traditions have remained so strong throughout 2000 years of diaspora or dispersal is that when they couldn't go to the temple, or sometimes even the synagogue, they had to learn to gather in different ways. Around a table, for example, as we are here. They might be apart physically from the rest of their community, but they were joined in the sharing of symbols and stories and prayers and memories, and actions such as praise and thanksgiving.

This Maundy Thursday, as we sit in our separate dwellings, let us not forget that the cup and the bread which Jesus took that fateful evening were rooted in traditions which dated back to God's great rescue of a people in exile - a people who had to learn the hard way that God travelled with them.

As Christians we believe that Jesus travels with us through life, death and beyond. That is our hope. That the saviour who was betrayed on this night, and sentenced to death, rose again, giving a new meaning to our bread and our cup.

Maybe in this time of exile we can learn new ways, or re-learn old ways, of affirming our identity in Christ. Maybe we will find new symbols which for us will represent God's presence in this pandemic, or gain a deeper understanding of the ones we have.

This doesn't prevent us longing to gather again. Jewish people traditionally finish Passover by calling out to each other 'Next year in Jerusalem' expressing the hope of restoration as a people, centred around the Holy City.

We too believe in a new Jerusalem, in freedom for all humanity. So let's finish by toasting each other with 'next year in God's house', knowing that wherever we celebrate Holy Week God is with us and one day he will gather us all together. Meanwhile we live in hope and in faith.

Next year in God's house!