

The Eagerly Desired Meal

In the New Testament of our Bible, we have four versions of the story of Jesus, four different records of his words and his deeds. More than this were set down in writing but these four were the ones most used by the early church as the Way of Jesus spread across the known world and so they became the standard. Sometimes we forget that they are really four different books, four different memories of what Jesus did and said during his physical life on Earth. I find that when I take the time to recognize and explore the differences between them, I almost always find something significant.

All four gospels tell the story of the night we call Maundy Thursday, the night that Jesus took his last meal with his comrades before his death. As is generally true, John's telling of the story is quite different from Matthew, Mark and Luke, but there are also subtle differences between the Synoptic Gospels. As we have been following the story of Jesus in Luke this year, let us consider one point at which Luke's Gospel is unique in telling this story. Listen again to these words from verses 15 & 16: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."

I cannot read or hear those words without coming face to face with the depth of conflicting emotion that is encoded within them. With these few words, Jesus expresses both the fulfillment of joyful expectation and the anticipation of pain, grief and loss to come. Why was Jesus looking forward to this meal with eager desire? As 21st Century Gentile Christians in a modern and affluent society, it may be hard for us to imagine what Passover would have meant to those first century Palestinian Jews. It was the great joyous feast of their year. For almost everyone, there would be enough to eat, something not all could count on as a regular occurrence. There would be a holiday feeling, as well as a Holy Day feeling. Families would be together, remembering the great things that God had done for their ancestors and within their own lives. It was Christmas and Easter and the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving all wrapped into one. For Jesus, who knew what awaited him in the days to come, it was his last chance to celebrate with his friends, to let them know he loved them and to feel their love for him.

We know, because we know the rest of the story, that in less than twenty-four hours he would be betrayed unto death by one of these friends, denied by another, deserted by all – even, seemingly, by his Loving Father. There would be no more blessed, happy Seder meals for Jesus of Nazareth, at least not until the kingdom of God would be fulfilled and, as he told his disciples, not even he knew when that would be. Whether through divine foreknowledge or inspiration or simply through political savvy and a keen assessment of the situation, Jesus knew that he was going to die in Jerusalem that week and that given the political realities of Roman occupation and the charges likely to be brought against him, he would die on a cross.

It is always easy, and particularly so at this time in our church year, to focus on Jesus' divinity, on how different he is from us. It is easy to speak of him as the Son of God, the sinless one. It is easy to talk about his obedience to God's will, about his remarkable courage, his amazing compassion, his ability to accept the challenge to die for others all while forgiving and consoling those around him. It is easy to think of him as fundamentally different from ourselves.

On Sunday in Sunday School, Sean and Kym Sutton and I read through the scriptures we are about to read tonight and discussed them. "Remember when you read this," I told them, "that

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Jesus was not Superman, that he felt pain just like you and me,” and Kym’s eyes got very big. It makes a real difference to the story when we remember that Jesus was in every respect as human as we are. It is much, much harder for us to think of him, as we read this story, as just a regular guy from a little town, a man who loved his family and his friends, who was afraid of dying, who was brutalized, who died in agony. It’s hard to remember tonight that he was just like you and me.

But that’s really where our hope lies. Jesus was just like us and so we have the potential to be just like him. The true experience of the love and power of God does not require a special heritage or secret knowledge. All it requires is the will to do justice as we have the opportunity and the love of mercy and a humble heart. Jesus eagerly desired to eat that special meal with his friends. Now, through his sacrifice, we are invited to make of our lives a banquet in the presence of God. If we desire that communion with God, we shall have it. And that is why, in spite of all, we call this Friday Good.