

Maundy Thursday- April 5th, 2007

Last Rites

Luke 22: 7-22

The part of the Jesus story that we are remembering tonight and tomorrow are not easy for us as Christians to embrace casually. We all know that the Gospels depict the events of Jesus' last days in much the same way we would enter the room of someone who is dying from cancer. While we know that death is coming soon, we find ourselves struggling to affirm that life is still present and precious. So, we can appreciate the disciple's resistance to the idea that Jesus will be put to death, even when Jesus was telling them this would happen soon now that they were in Jerusalem for Passover.

Emotions always run high when we are facing life and death issues. What would you be feeling if you had been invited to dinner by a host who you suspected would be hauled off and executed the next day? And what conversations would you want to engage in with your closest friends at the dinner that night if the host represented a kind of religious hero or a hope that power of fear and domination would not ultimately win out in the world? And what would you say if the host expressed his desire that somehow his fate with death could be avoided?

In the Roman Catholic tradition the church has marked the sacredness of human life at the time of death with a sacrament of Extreme Unction, which includes the anointing of the body of the one who is in danger of dying. Most Catholics think of this sacrament act of claiming God's grace in the face of death as the last rites of the church. A careful reading of the Gospels gives us the impression that the Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples and his act of service in washing their feet took the sacramental form of "last rites". Jesus had given his disciples his farewell speech and he mentioned that betrayal would come at the hands of one of them. The threat of Jesus' arrest by the Jewish establishment and the Roman authorities was real. Death was in the air.

The church has often interpreted this "last rites" event when Jesus and his disciples were together in an upper room as part of the passion story of God's love for the world which demanded that an innocent man die for the sins of humanity. But I believe that we should pay closer attention to the emotions that the Gospel stories portray in this last rites event. I say this because I have come to think that we are more sensitized to the presence of the holy in life and death moments. We may like to think that God shows up more often when we are noticing the beauty of creation or on occasions where love abounds and hope flourishes. But, my experience tells me that our capacity for sensing pain, suffering, and death in others actually puts us in touch at an emotional level with the compassion of God for humanity. As long as we can fight a war against terrorism at a distant shore without seeing the bloodshed or death, as long as we can ignore the hardships and sufferings of people living in poverty while the economy produces massive wealth for many, as long as we allow the administration of justice by legalized killing, as long as we permit our government's torture of our enemy combatants, we are in danger of anesthetizing ourselves to the pain and suffering of others and losing touch with the sacred.

Jesus' encouraged his disciples at the Last Supper to remember him and his way to apprehend the holy even as he faced betrayal, hostility, torture and death. He didn't say to look on the bright side of life. He talked about his death openly and honestly with his followers. In our own day and age it has taken the likes of death and dying researchers like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross to remind us that people who know they are dying struggle to find someone, family or friends, who will acknowledge with them what we are feeling about their pending death.

I have discovered that some of the greatest works of art that have been produced in the past 200 years are those like Gericault's "The Raft of the Medusa" or Picasso's Guernica which depict moments of tragic human suffering in history. One only has to wonder why so many are moved to deep emotion when they visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, or why the scenes of people jumping from one of the burning twin towers or running from the dust clouds of the collapsed buildings in NYC have such a profound effect on our national psyche. Reflecting on my own religious experience I have come to realize that my sensitivity to the sacredness of life and to moral living under God was stimulated more by being exposed to human pain and suffering than by hearing any of the Bible stories that were read in church. I still remember to this day being shown as a child in elementary school the pictures of Japanese people standing burned and disoriented in the rubble of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that we were shown to motivate our civil defense training.

Tonight, as we remember again Jesus' last rites with his disciples in an upper room, our religious sensibilities about the presence of God's grace and our need to claim God's power in this violent and often cruel world might be strengthened if we can allow ourselves to get in touch with the emotional side of facing Jesus' death. Lord knows that most of us fear at times that hatred, injustice, and violence might defeat the power of self-giving love or the yearning for shalom. In such moments we ultimately have to ask ourselves where the hand of God is at work in occasions where we see only loneliness, cruelty, anger, suffering, and defeat. My wife and I watched last week a movie based on the true story about Sofia Scholl, a young university student in Germany who was resisting the mindset of Nazism under the Third Reich. She and her brother were put on trial for treason against Third Reich because they distributed flyers which challenged the thinking and values inherent in Hitler's agenda. During her interrogation and trial Sofia Scholl defended her actions of free speech and questioned the Nazi logic about inferior races, going to war in God's name, and reclaiming German greatness by domination and mind-control tactics. But, when she confesses she cannot be apolitical under this system of tyranny she is put on trial and within one day she is executed on a guillotine by the Nazi regime.

I must say that the end of the movie was disturbing. It left us with the feeling that those who seek to live on the basis of self-giving love, a desire for peace, and non-violent resistance to evil seem weak and helpless against the powers of domination, fear, and hatred. But it also made me aware that we must ultimately depend on the power of God to change the human heart so that peace and justice can emerge in our world. And if the

story of Jesus' last rites is any indication to the process we must go through, then opening ourselves to the pain and suffering of others is the first and perhaps most difficult step. May God so help us.