

Holy Thursday – 2021
Exodus 24:3-11
1 Corinthians 10:16-17
Mark 14:12-26

This last Sunday was Palm Sunday, the day that the church commemorates Jesus' Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem. It is a high feast for believers throughout the world. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week and draws people to remember Christ's sacrifice and participate in the worship life of His church. There was an elderly lady in the back of the church, a woman that I don't know personally. She is the matriarch of a family with whom I *am* familiar, a faithful and happy clan that are members at one of our sister congregations. She didn't come up to the altar for the sacrament, so I asked her son if I should commune her in the pew. He said that that would be most welcome.

As is our custom, the deacon and I ventured down into the nave to serve those who are unable to make it up the steps. Our aged or otherwise infirm members who are nonetheless in the Divine Service are a testament to perseverance, a witness to life-long fidelity to Christ and His means of grace and so it is especially pleasant to serve them. On this occasion, two of our treasured ladies, after a long absence due to vulnerability to the virus, were back in church. The eagerness and thankfulness which was apparent in their demeanor was something I soaked in as the deacon and I extended to them Christ's body and blood. And then, in the rear, we served this unknown aged Lutheran woman from Immanuel in Riverside. After the deacon gave her the blood of Christ, I handed him the ciborium and I knelt to give her a blessing. As I did, she looked at me appreciatively and I could see a tear coming out of her left eye. I had to stop, mid-sentence, to regain my voice and then finish the dismissal blessing.

What prompted her emotion? I could only speculate. The body and blood of Christ; how many of you have received it appreciatively? Do you know what it took for Jesus to provide it for you? Do you know what benefit comes from receiving it?

Our Lord's disciples knew that danger was growing. Their Master had displayed His Messianic authority and the apostles were determined to stay close to Him. Peter had confessed: "You are the Christ; you are the Son of the Living God" (Matthew 16:16). Nathanael/Bartholomew said this: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 2:49). The disciples had seen that Jesus had mastered every situation they had encountered. He fed the hungry multitudes, He calmed an angry sea, He evaded hostile crowds, He healed the sick of every variety, He changed water into wine to make festive a dry wedding, He raised the dead – the widow of Nain's son, Jairus' daughter, and Lazarus of Bethany. God's kingdom had clearly come. Christ *was* that kingdom. Why would you *not believe* that He would handle whatever the situation demanded? Why would you *not stay close* to Him and feel yourself secure?

Passover meant that you stayed close to the head of the household, the head of the family. At Passover the head of the household would ask questions that beg the story of the Exodus, the story of God's deliverance. Food entered into the dialogue, food meant to elaborate on how God brought His people out of Egypt, out of slavery, out of a land of death. The head of our household is Christ. The head of the church's family is the crucified King. He gathered His

church to Himself on that Passover in the Upper Room and gave them the new food of the new covenant. In mere hours Jesus would be dead. The danger that lurked nearby would spring into evil action. Jesus knew it was coming. Jesus knew that He would submit to His Father, submit to the cross, submit to death. Despite their protestations to the contrary, His disciples abandoned Him at the critical hour. How did they feel? In the safety that their denials provided for them, how did they feel? Peter and Andrew and James and Matthew and Nathanael and Thomas – how did they feel as they harbored safely away from Christ and His horrible death?

I can speculate; they felt empty, a solitude that rips at the heart, a wrenching abandonment that convicts and convicts and convicts. Have you felt that? Have you felt that empty dread in your heart as you abandon Christ and soak yourself in yourself, soak yourself in your sin? Death is a horrible thing to face – especially a death like this. Crucifixion struck fear and cold antipathy in the hearts of men. Rome had no qualms about crucifying those who upset their unquestioned authority. Everyone knew it. John alone stood there, with Jesus' mother and three other devout women, at the bloody scene. All the apostles had received Christ's body and blood in the Upper Room. All but John abandoned Him at Calvary. All deeply, profoundly, miserably regretted it.

The scene at the cross is abhorrent. Hate spills from the mouths of men; hatred for God. The violence and the hatred is a powerful formula, making seemingly strong disciples grow weak kneed. It is a spiritual reality that is in view. This world is broken and Satan prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Nothing has changed. The world has experienced relative calm since the Second World War, but the enemy is bent on advancing. Freedoms are diminishing. A strange authoritarianism is on the rise. The church appears to be overly placid, apparently content to take her orders from those who either covertly or overtly despise her. Why is that? The vitriol that is spent against the Lord at the cross is still alive, still craven, and still seeking more adherents. How does the church build faithful followers of the Crucified in the 21st Century?

Jesus said this: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:23-24). You know that denying yourself and taking up your cross is the same as staying close to the Head of our household. The Lord Christ is now, and ever shall be, the Head of the household of your heart. He governs this congregation, He governs His church throughout the world, and He governs salvation. Stay close to Him. He shed His blood for one reason: To keep you close to Him, now and forever. You have failed as His disciple. You are a sinner. You are self-entitled, eager to run off and indulge in whatever suits you. You cover your tracks but you know what you are – you know there is no excuse for your defiance of God's holiness. But here's the wonderful thing... about you and every other living creature – Christ does not reject you; quite the contrary, He is eager to walk the way of sorrow, to bear your sin as He bears His cross. He sheds His blood to save you. Forgiveness flows from His body (He loves you). Grace flows from His body (He loves you). Eternal life flows from His body (He loves you). He endured such torment to make you His own. He continues to prosper you with His love, His commitment.

Stay close to Him. Life is found in Him. A superlative life that is full of contentment, peace, fulfillment, love, hope – the world and its vanity cannot quench your thirst for what your soul

desires. Your sinful flesh and its demands will leave you empty, isolated, alone with your guilt and your shame. Stay close to Him. This altar, this holy house, that is how you stay close to Him. Hear His Word; receive His gifts; enlarge your life. Stay close to Him. In season and out of season, when all is calm and when threats abound, when those in authority give you their leave to do so and when they insist that you refrain from practicing your faith – stay close to Him. I suspect that that old woman knew *exactly* what she had been given. As she received His body and blood, that aged saint knew that Christ gave her what only He could – forgiveness, heaven, divine love and divine grace. When we are close to Him, we are where we belong, irrespective of what the world says. He is so astoundingly faithful. He stays close to us. He is making disciples in the same way that He always has... now... in our times... in our household.

The apostles saw the risen Lord. They were overjoyed to see their risen Lord. From then on, they stayed close to Him. They knew, forgiveness was in His body and blood. They knew, grace was in His body and blood. They knew, life itself was in His body and blood. You know it as well. You have come here to eat it, to drink deeply of it. What is marvelous and sweet is this... He stays close to us. He stays close to us and death is the door to heaven.