

Last Supper in Luke

I'm not sure if any of us ever have had opportunity to share a Passover meal. It is something we are hoping to do at Xchange in the near future. To learn what the different elements of the meal are, to learn about how the meal tells a story, and to discover our part in the story.

Jesus' last meal was a Passover meal. And he hosts this meal – and then engages in a series of monumentally audacious moves. The one who hosts the Passover meal, is responsible for making sure that those present are drawn into the story of how God saves his people. And it has its roots in the story we heard from the Old Testament reading:

That for four centuries, the Hebrew people had provided the Egyptian dynasty with an incredible human resource. And that is all the Hebrews were. Human resources, not people – slaves, not human beings. Hebrews – or according to the Egyptian documents, Apiru. We can't call them Israelites yet, because they have not got as far as Israel. That's still forty years in the future!

And we know the story. Of how Moses returns to Egypt, and pleads for his people to be freed. Until, after a series of contests, plagues, the decisive move is made. The angel of death descends on the land, and kills the firstborn of all who have not sacrificed their lamb and put the sign on their door. You might say it was divine genocide, as the dark angel passes over the homes of the Hebrew families targeting only the Egyptians. Traditionally, that is where the Passover meal gets its name. So Pharaoh, having lost his own son, reluctantly releases the Hebrews.

But he seems to have changed his mind before he has changed his clothes. So off he races with his army, in hot pursuit of his recently released human resources. And the Hebrew people see them coming. A mighty army behind them; an expanse of water in front of them! And in that moment, what are they supposed to do? What is going to happen next?

Well, we know from the chapter we heard from Exodus, that God delivers the people. For those who shared the Passover meal, this was not just a good story. It is our story. We would not be here if this had not happened. This defines who we are. So when we share this meal, and hear this story – we are not simply being fed and entertained. It's not like a cinema trip followed by a reflective trip to Pizza Hut. We are drawn again into the drama of who God is, and how he acts in the world. And we are drawn to play our part in that drama. Something enormous has happened, and we are part of it...

So imagine, in Jesus' day, sharing the Passover meal. Celebrating that God is a saving God, who led us out of slavery in Egypt – but hold on a minute, if that is the character of God, erm ... how is it that we are not experiencing the freedom he promised? If God delivers people from slavery and oppression in Egypt, why not liberate us from Rome? When you share the Passover meal, you celebrate the reality that God is in the business of saving his people from slavery and oppression. And yet, it isn't happening! The Passover meal in first century Palestine may well be celebrated with bitterness, confusion, frustration – but perhaps also with confidence, and patience, and hope. What does it mean to be the people of a God who brings liberation, when we are living under an oppressive empire? What does it mean to share this meal? What is God going to do? What is our part in the drama? Frustration, Hope, questions.

How do you celebrate Passover in first century Palestine? Jesus is about demonstrate, by making an almost blasphemous retelling of the Exodus story. He promises that he won't eat it until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God, that is, until the liberation it speaks of becomes reality. Now that is quite a bold promise – but here come the big shockers:

Firstly, he takes up this unleavened bread, breaks it, and gives it to his followers saying, "This is my body, which is given for you – do this in remembrance of me!" Hold on a minute – the bread is supposed to remind us of the experience of slavery and rushing out to be saved. And now you're telling us it's about your body! So, when we are supposed to be thinking about salvation from poverty and slavery, we are supposed to think of your body being given! Jesus is telling us, that the great story of Passover, is really about him!

If you were a first century Jew, at this stage you might reach for a stiff drink. But then he beats you to it. As you drink wine at Passover, there are four different cups that speak of four distinct aspects of the freedom that God promises in Exodus 6:6-7. (1) "I will take you out of Egypt", (2) "I will deliver you from Egyptian slavery", (3) "I will redeem you with a demonstration of my power", and (4) "I will acquire you as a nation". Since each of these cups of wine symbolize an action that was performed by God, Jews fill a small cup with wine at four different points in the Passover and drink each cup of wine.

So, when Jesus picks up a glass of wine, wine that already means the fourfold saving action of the covenant God, what does he do with it? He says, 'This wine that you're drinking is the new covenant in my blood!' If you are a Jewish follower of Jesus, the Passover meal would never be the same again.

It's difficult to appreciate the impact of what Jesus is doing with this Passover meal, but the closest we could imagine would be to go out for a Christmas meal – and have the person hosting us tell us that, in reality – the meal is not after all really about what someone else did many centuries ago, but about what I will do tomorrow – and that is what this meal is about! It would sound ridiculous if just anyone tried this – but none of the disciples question the legitimacy of what Jesus is saying!

You would never again be able to celebrate God's saving action without picturing Jesus as somehow being the agent of that saving action. And because it's not just a lecture or a sermon or a talk, but a meal – you are being told that your identity as a child of God is bound up with the fate of this Jesus.

And Jesus clearly knew that his fate over the next 24 hours was hardly something to look forward to. He has already spoken of the spilling of his own blood and the giving of his own body for his people. He knew the fate that would inevitably overtake him. And here at the meal the process begins.

This is not the only example of one person facing a vicarious death because they actively seek for their people to be freed from oppression. We have seen many examples in history – and today of course. One need only think of current events in Tibet to see people willing to lay down their lives for justice.

Or from a Christian perspective we might picture Iraq, and the troubles faced by the Christian community there, at the hands of those with a lust for violence. Christians and the intelligentsia, particularly in the North, have been targeted by those with an interest of

maintaining unrest in Iraq. Late last year the Bishop of Mosul – a Chaldean Christian – demonstrated how he knew that his job was one of extreme danger, and which nevertheless, he felt compelled to pursue: as Christmas approached, he told the press that “The main message of our prayers shall be peace [...] which we have been trying to achieve despite threats and violence.” Two weeks ago Bishop Rahho was kidnapped, and his body-guards murdered. This week, his own body was recovered from a shallow grave. He knew well enough the likely fate that awaited him if he pursued his ministry.

But the death that awaited Jesus was not simply a martyrdom that awaits all who challenge an oppressive regime. Jesus didn't have any body-guards – although he was offered them : As his ministry reaches its climax, his disciples should have understood. Jesus offers a great speech about what it means to be citizens in the Kingdom of God, and as he is busy giving them instructions, and foretelling his own death – their response is – hey, we have two swords !

Yesterday a dispute arose amongst the children, as to whose turn it was to play on the computer game. And it irrupted into a miniature war, which resulted in me using that tried and tested phrase – that's enough. It is precisely the phrase used by Jesus when at the climax of his ministry. – Hey, we've got two swords – we'll look after you – we'll be your body guards. And you can almost hear his exasperation as Jesus says, ‘Oh that's enough’ – if you don't get it now I'm wasting my breath. That's enough.

How depressing must that have been. A ministry that began with people from his home town trying to hurl him off a cliff, and reached it's climax as he faced those closest to him, and said ‘Oh that's enough!’

What is celebrated at this last Passover meal, is not simply another example of someone giving their life for another. It is rather that a new era is beginning, one where greatness is demonstrated not by a display of military or revolutionary power, but by self-giving love. The self-giving love of God himself, whose own son declares that his body is given for you, and his blood is spilled for you. But this is not simply an example of how self-giving love works – this is the reason why self-giving love works.

The crucifixion of Jesus was not simply some lynch mob getting rid of the son of God in some dark corner of time and space. The Jewish religious system was the most sophisticated in the world – it is the basis of all today's Abrahamic faiths, because it makes so much sense. And the Roman legal system was the most sophisticated the world had to offer – so much so that it's only in recent years that lawyers are no longer made to study Latin. This Jesus was to be put to death by the very best that the world had to offer. Not by some anonymous Iraqi lynch mob. But by the great and the good and the most powerful systems conceivable.

And it is precisely in the cross that we see the victory of self-giving love. At the cross, where self-giving love is utterly defeated, where God's Kingdom is a conquered Kingdom, where God himself is mortally wounded.

The central point of the Old Covenant was the Exodus story, but now it becomes a mere metaphor, a sign of what is about to take place. But in the week ahead, Jesus is all that is left of the people of God. His fate is sealed. He is stuck between the power of the Egyptians pressing in on him; and the unbridgeable depths stretch out before him. That is where Holy Week leaves us. All we have to go on is a Passover meal -