Bittersweet celebration (March 29, 2018)

Exodus 12:1–14 and Matthew 26:17-30

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and redeemer. Amen.

This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance. (Exodus 12:14)

For the past 3,000 years – give or take a few years – people of the Jewish faith have been celebrating the Passover. It is one of the most significant events of the year in this faith tradition because they celebrate how the Lord rescued their ancestors from the slavery in Egypt. As the Lord cast the final plague on the people of Egypt through Moses, the Israelites were commanded to separate themselves from the Egyptians so that death would pass over them. Their instructions in the book of Exodus are very specific – about when to celebrate this meal, how to prepare it, and how to eat it. The Passover meal was supposed to be eaten quickly because they did not know when the Lord would pass over their homes – hence the cooking instructions for the lamb and baking instructions for the bread. The bitter herbs – often horseradish or the stems of romaine lettuce – are used to remind them of the bitterness of slavery.

This is the meal that the disciples were preparing for Jesus.

It was indeed a bittersweet celebration for Jesus – but not because of the herbs. It was bittersweet because he knew what was coming. His betrayer, Judas, sat at the same table, sharing the same food and drink. Judas had already done the deal – he had secretly met with the chief priests and agreed to the price of 30 pieces of silver, about 4 months’ worth of wages. (Matthew 26:14-16) The disciples, who cried out in shock – Surely, not I Lord! – were also present. They too would also abandon him. His beloved Peter, the rock on which the Church would be built – would deny him in a few short hours.

The stage was set. And there was no turning back.
We will never be able to grasp the wide range of emotions that Jesus must have been feeling on that night. Sadness. Regret. Frustration. Anger. Loneliness. Fear. After all this time with his disciples, they still did not get it! They still did not understand what kind of King Jesus would be – not a mighty warrior, but a humble and compassionate Shepherd. They did not understand that Jesus HAD to die for their sins. Just days before the Passover meal, the disciples chastised a woman for using expensive oil to anoint Jesus. And Jesus told them that this was a good service because she was preparing his body for burial. (Matthew 26:6-13) They just didn’t understand.

What is so profound about this story is how Jesus reacted to their stubborn ineptitude – Surely, not I Lord! He could have yelled at them. He could have chastised them for their lack of faith as he had in the past. He could have ordered them all to get out. But he didn’t. Instead, he shared himself with them. He broke his body and poured out his blood to show them what pure and perfect love looks like. He poured himself out for them – so that they could be forgiven. He poured himself out for us – so that we too can be forgiven.

In this beautiful sharing of his body and blood, Jesus is directly connecting himself with the plight of the Israelites in captivity in Egypt. He is the lamb without blemish. It is his blood that is about to be poured out. His life is about to be sacrificed so that the Lord will pass over our sin. Because of Christ, we have been freed from the bondage of sin. We are no longer the captives of evil because death is about to be swallowed up in victory. (1 Cor. 15:54) The covenant that the Lord made with his people all those thousands of years ago has been sealed by the blood of the Lamb.

This is the covenant of grace that is freely available to you and me.

We do not deserve this covenant of grace – we are just like the disciples. We read the stories of Jesus and yet, we don’t get it. We stubbornly refuse to do what we are supposed to do – love our neighbours, forgive our enemies, welcome the stranger, give generously, serve others, and so much more. And when we are confronted with our own hypocrisy, what is our response? Surely, not I Lord!
But Jesus does not push us away in our stubborn ineptitude. Instead, he welcomes us to the table – to eat and drink with him so that the covenant of grace can be poured out on us. As we gather together in a few minutes around this table, I invite you to let the grace of the Lord wash over you. Let it cleanse you body, mind, and soul. Let it create in you a clean heart and a renewed spirit. (Ps. 51:10) As the bread is being served, acknowledge that you are a sinner. Be reminded that you don’t deserve this. Be reminded that you cannot earn God’s grace nor can you ever repay Jesus for his perfect sacrifice. But that feeling of inadequacy doesn’t need to last for long – as you take the bread into your mouth, let your sorrow turn into joy with these words – thank you, Lord Jesus. Thank you for passing over my sin and blessing me with your redeeming grace.

Amen.

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