

“GOING TO THE CROSS”

Mark 14:12-26

As Easter approaches and we are able to share together in this communion service via Zoom today, we're going to spend a few moments reflecting on the first communion service that Jesus shared with his close friends, the disciples. The circumstances are a little odd today, although the words and actions will be very familiar to most of us, as was the case for those first disciples.

You see, they were taking part in the celebrations of the Passover. They had gone to Jerusalem, the city which was a holy place for them and where all Jewish people aspired to go to celebrate the festival at least once in their lifetime. Along with thousands of other pilgrims, this little group of men had come down from Galilee to participate in the festival which was at the heart of their faith and at the heart of their national identity, the time when they remembered together and gave God thanks for their liberation from the oppression and slavery of Egypt many centuries before and joined in exuberant worship to the God who continued to sustain them and protect them. As far as we can tell, Jesus himself was staying in nearby Bethany and he and his band of followers went into the city of Jerusalem for the main acts of worship and thanksgiving.

The first day of the festival proper has arrived and the disciples are eager to discover where they will be able to meet to share together in the meal that is the centrepiece of the celebrations. Jesus has obviously already arranged the venue and two of the disciples – Peter and John, according to other gospel accounts – are going off to set the room up and get the catering under way. The custom was that, if you lived in Jerusalem and had a spare room, you were expected to allow any pilgrims who needed space to use the room for their meal. The way Jesus told them that they were to find the room was a little strange, maybe – finding a man carrying water, which was usually a woman's job – but everything else was pretty much as you'd expect.

As they gathered that evening in the upstairs room, it would, again, have seemed fairly familiar. They would all have celebrated the Passover back in Galilee, using the same readings and prayers and responses and eating the same food, so the only change here was probably the venue and the fact that they were meeting as a group rather than in their families, as they usually did. John's Gospel mentions a couple of odd things at the beginning of the evening – such as Jesus washing their feet as they arrived – but Mark's account gives the impression that all started off as normal: the familiar routine and an opportunity to reflect on God's goodness.

Until, that is, Jesus drops a bombshell into the conversation over the meal. One of them is going to betray him. They were all aware that the opposition Jesus had stirred up meant that there was an element of risk

in their being there, but they weren't prepared for this announcement – and it seems that they were now each a bit unsettled as to whether the traitor might be them – “*Surely not I?*” Jesus, though, says that it is part of his destiny – “*The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him*” – and then goes on to do something even more unsettling.

He uses the familiar words of the Passover liturgy and reinterprets them to refer to himself. The words about sacrifice and liberation are used by him to point towards his impending death, as he speaks of his body and blood in the context of the redemption of God's people. The final part of his path to the cross has begun, the path to the place where the new covenant that God is making with humanity will be sealed with his own blood. The disciples must have been completely bewildered by all this. The familiar routine, the traditional words, the actions that they had watched over the Passover table so many times before had suddenly been given new meaning – but they weren't quite sure what that meaning was.

This was Jesus' way of communicating something of the liberating love of God. That's what the Passover was all about, but now – somehow – Jesus himself was involved in it. That's what communion is all about, too – this regular repetition of Jesus' radical reinterpretation of the ancient ritual. It's at the heart of our faith, at the heart of our worship, and it has that place of central importance because it sums up the great act of sacrifice which was the goal of Jesus' mission. As Tom Wright puts it: “*This meal will say what Jesus most wants to say to his followers and because it is to be repeated, it will go on saying it.*”

Now, with the passage of centuries and the gifts of theologians and preachers – with the benefit of two thousand years of hindsight – we can see things in a way which those first disciples could not. We can piece it all together, along with the crucifixion and the resurrection and the ascension and everything else. We have our regular times of communion and our particular ways of expressing all that. And the danger is, that just as those disciples discovered sharing the Passover meal with Jesus, as it is to be done over and over again, it can all become a bit too familiar. Because behind these simple actions and oft-repeated words there is still the incomprehensible, unutterable, unlimited, amazing, astonishing, mind-blowing love of God for us.

In a few moments, we will hear again the words we hear every time we celebrate communion. We will take the bread and wine as we do so often. But we're doing it in rather strange circumstances today – peering into our digital devices, hearing and seeing each other but physically separated. It's odd and perhaps a bit unsettling, certainly not what we have been used to. Maybe that will prompt us to think carefully about what we are doing and listen out for what Jesus might be saying to us through this.

At root, what he is saying is that God loves you. You matter to God. And to demonstrate that, Jesus went to the cross for you. This bread and wine, the ordinary everyday symbols which point to a glorious and world changing reality, remind us of just what it cost him to do that. It wasn't just an agonising death: it was a cosmic battle with the powers of evil for the souls of men and women, for your eternal destiny. Jesus went to the cross for you because God loves you so much.

Use this rather different way of doing this today to reset your thinking, to cut through the familiar to the astounding truth behind all this. Listen as God tells you once again that he loves you. Reflect once more on the sacrifice of Jesus to make real that love. Pause and give thanks for a love that is overwhelming and beyond our understanding. Eat and drink this morning with profound gratitude to God for the sacrifice of Jesus and the liberation that comes with it.

For reflection and discussion

- 1) Why was the Passover so important to the Jewish people? Is there anything comparable in our national culture?
- 2) We celebrate communion regularly. Is that a good thing? Why/why not? Should we celebrate more or less frequently?
- 3) When we celebrate communion we usually say the same words and follow the same pattern. What are the benefits of that? What are the dangers?
- 4) What does communion mean to you? How do you make it meaningful each time you participate?
- 5) What do you find most helpful to remind you of God's love for you?