

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14  
1 Corinthians 11:23-26  
John 13:1-17, 31b-35  
Psalm 116:1, 10-17

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO, S.O.SC, RECTOR OF ALL HALLOWS PARISH, SOUTH RIVER, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND, ON MAUNDY THURSDAY, MARCH 27, 2013, AT ALL HALLOWS BRICK CHURCH.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The acquisition of language is such a fascinating thing. From birth to about the age of four, I was raised in an environment where Mandarin was spoken. Then from four on, I was introduced into a world where Cantonese was the predominant language, with heavy usage of British English alongside. Then, from eighteen on, it has been American English through and through. And through the years, I have acquired a few more languages through studying and traveling. By now, it has been many years since I last used Chinese on a daily basis. Sometimes, I feel like I'm losing the ability to explain complex ideas in either Mandarin or Cantonese. But once in a while, I will remember a word from Chinese and see new meanings in it, after not having used or encountered it for a while. One such word is 禮拜 (LI BAI) which roughly means "a church service" and I have always understood it as such until I got to see it again in a new light. It is actually composed of characters. One means "liturgy or ceremony," while the other means "worship or homage." And all these years, I thought that there was no word that captures the meaning of the ceremonial aspect of liturgy in Chinese. I think this shows that when you are in the thick of it, so to speak, it is difficult to see and discern the nuances and different layers of meaning of a given word or of a given event. But when we have acquired certain distance, we can see things with a new set of eyes.

Our lesson from Exodus this evening recalls the formative event in the life of the nation of Israel - how God delivered them from the bondage in Egypt into the Land of Promise by means of the Passover event in which God slew the firstborns of Egypt but he spared the Hebrew households. The Israelites are commanded to eat their Passover lamb in very specific detail - an unblemished male, year-old lamb, whose blood will be put on the door posts and on the lintels on the houses in which they will eat it. It must be fire-roasted with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

Perhaps, the most interesting thing is the gesture in which the Israelites are instructed to consume this Passover Lamb: hips clothed, shoes on, and staff in hand; oh, and you must eat it in haste.

This is a liturgical commemoration through and through, for the very word liturgy means "work of the people." The community of the congregation in celebrating the Passover feast.

To this day, the Jewish people still celebrate this Passover every year. The Book of Exodus describes the Passover as being part of the first month of the year. That was the old Hebrew calendar when the first month was in the Spring. Now, the Jewish New Year is in the fall. But the essence of the Passover celebration and commemoration is still the same.

"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."

Maundy Thursday begins the Christian Passover. In fact, the Greek word for Easter is Pascha which comes from the Hebrew "Pesach" meaning Passover. It is the Passover of The Lord Jesus Christ, because he was that unblemished, immaculate Lamb which was slain for us to take away our sins.

This evening, we look back at the Passover meal that Jesus shared with his disciple, that mystical, last supper that has given rise to our Eucharistic celebration day after day, week after week, year after year.

While partaking of their familiar cultural custom of eating the Passover meal, Jesus and the disciples expanded and reinterpreted the Passover. Through their action and words, we are now able to see the Passover in Exodus and our salvation history with a new set of eyes. The Passover had always been their in the disciples' lives. But Jesus helped them understand the deeper meaning of this formative event in their mission and vocation as his disciples.

At this mystical supper, Jesus is now the Paschal Lamb who will be sacrificed for us. He takes the bread and breaks it and shares it with his disciples, says that this is his Body which will be given up for them. He then takes the cup of wine and shares it with them, saying that this is his blood which will be poured out for the remission of the sins of many. The words, bread and cup, and other symbols are all there. But the disciples will not comprehend the full extent what is really happening until after the death and resurrection of Christ. In other words, they will be able to see more in hindsight.

My brothers and sisters. the deep religious lesson embedded in our Scriptures this evening is that enlightenment is usually not an abrupt realization of certain truths. Rather, enlightenment comes through a process of the evolution of our thinking and of our spiritual life.

In our context, enlightenment can be roughly described as spiritual advancement. Ten percent of that is our openness to God and other ninety percent is our effort to grow and learn, with God's help.

Oftentimes, we hear people say that faith is such a personal matter that we should just keep that to ourselves. Or we may hear someone say that they had learned all they ever needed to know about God when they were young.

One who says that they have learned all they needed to learn about math in First Grade will not be able to do calculus. Likewise, one who says that they have learned all about God in First Grade will not be able to make sense of the world in which God actually gives rain to both the good and the evil.

And that's why our liturgical commemoration is important. On the one hand, our remembrance in liturgy is a spiritual review of the faith that has been passed down to us by the saints. On the other hand, our liturgy invites us to grow in faith; it invites us to grow in our understanding and interpretation of the various events that have formed our salvation history.

Just as the disciples and Jesus saw the Passover event with a new set of eyes in their time and space, the Church in different time and space has viewed the Last Supper with different interpretations and theologies, hovering between remembrance and sacrifice.

So, on this Maundy Thursday, what does the Passover meal of Jesus and the disciples mean to you? How is the Holy Spirit speaking to you through our lessons and liturgy? What are the things that you notice for the first time but most likely they have been there along in this service year after year?

And did you notice that we use the word Passover at every Eucharist?

Indeed..

Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.  
Therefore let us keep the feast.

Amen.