

“Dysfunctional Dinner” – Lk 22:14-27,39-43 – Palm/Passion Sunday – Mar 20/16

I suppose most of you have been watching at least a little of the runup to the Presidential election in the Excited States. What a bizarre circus! It would be funny, except that it is totally frightening, especially for those of us old enough to remember grainy black-and-white films of bombastic clowns running for election in Italy and Germany, with crowds roaring their approval, and riots trashing and burning stores and books and homes of those considered the “evil others”. We remember also the voices of caution and warning being silenced by either the roar of the adoring populace or by sinister dark forces in the dead of night. The more the campaign progresses and the closer we get to what was once also long ago similarly declared an “impossible” outcome, the tenser will be the situation for the entire world.

Here in Luke’s gospel we have a similar kind of buildup ... a tense time, with people acting a bit strangely. Jesus seems particularly morbid; Peter is even more feisty than usual; plots are hatched; violence breaks out – all at what was normally a peaceful religious dinner ritual.

The most common pictures that come to mind from this text are of course the classic Renaissance paintings – you know the kind, just like in the Sunday School books – a long table, everyone seated on the one side facing the camera (well, facing the painter, but you know what I mean ...). Jesus is in the middle, the rest are seated according to height to make a nice taper down from Jesus to each side, providing perfect artistic balance. Judas is skulking on one end, Peter is holding court on the other. Everything on the table is neat and tidy, with the cup and the loaf sitting nicely in their own spaces. Rapt faces show rapt attention being paid to Jesus by all. Halos over all the disciples (except Judas), and a special kind of halo over Jesus’ head that suggests heaven and earth.

Ah yes, wonderful pictures and images. However, I find that real life keeps intervening to give me somewhat different images from this text. Frankly I hear in Luke’s text a description of a supper more like the typical dysfunctional family gathered for Thanksgiving than the idyllic images given to us from some long-ago painter. I hear noise, commotion, parallel conversations crossing each other loudly over a table loaded with a confusing assortment of foods, drinks and other dinner detritus. Instead of an artificial, static, unmoving, highly-posed picture, Luke provides us with what you’d get on the tape recorder of the 11-year-old who is cruising behind the chairs at Thanksgiving supper looking to tape something useful for later blackmail. Now we hear Jesus more clearly, now a babble of several voices competing, now Peter’s voice comes through clearly, now Jesus again, finally something about swords.

In fact, I’d wonder if anybody even heard Jesus opening words about eating the Passover before he suffered, except for one little detail that got recorded: “A dispute also arose among them as to which one would be regarded as the greatest.” Now, doesn’t that take the story back down off some sixteenth century painting and bring it right into where the chairs are lined up out of the dining room into the living room?! I mean, it’s just like the family opening up discussion on Aunt Minerva’s will about to be read next week at the lawyers! I don’t know how you feel, but for me that makes this scene more real than any contrived Reality Show! According to the text, Jesus reminds them he is about to suffer – and fairly soon, given the comment about not eating until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God. He also initiates the rite of Holy Communion, and points out that one amongst them will betray him. And what happens? Just like any collection of humans, they behave like humans: asking one another which of them will betray him, and they then escalate to a dispute about who will take over once the leader is gone. Mercy! It would be easy to be critical of the disciples, except that their behaviour is all too familiar, and if we’re totally honest with ourselves, all too familiar with even our own behaviours.

Also not unlike the usual family get-togethers, one of them – Peter – gets a bit loud in his protestations, and the whole scene degenerates into a bit of violence with the bit about the swords. “Swords – we need some swords, to be counted among the lawless! You’ll have to go buy some ... no, wait, here’s a couple ... those will do!”

Ah yes, there is plenty of trouble in the text – predictions of suffering; arguments over succession; betrayals; changing times; a need to take purse and bag; a need to be armed. But that trouble is recognizable, because it’s the kind that we see in real life, for both then and now there is always a lot of trouble in the world as well. In the midst of devout religious practice we still see arguing and abuse. Amongst those who like Peter have been charged with taking care of the brothers and sisters in faith, there are those who betray that trust, causing irreparable harm. We still fight over the spoils of the kingdom, striving to be seen as the best in Christ’s eyes. In the midst of plenty many still want for food, shelter, compassion and justice. There is indeed much in this text with which we are familiar.

But there is something else in this text as well that you can hear if you listen closely. The text proclaims a message of grace and mercy and hope that is even more timeless than the problems people create. The first and most obvious is of course the precious gift of Holy Communion, delivered in the words that still echo so powerfully today: “this bread is my body, given for you; this cup is the new covenant in my blood.” But there’s even more. This is not a rite or ritual to watch, this is a family supper to which the children of God are invited: “so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom.” That’s why it’s called Communion – it is very much a together and togetherness act in which we participate as a family. And even though the scene at the table seems to end in chaos and confusion, in debacle and dysfunction, Jesus provides the closing note with compassion and grace. In prayer Jesus seeks to be released if possible from the heavy burden God has laid upon him, and given the events that have just unfolded we can sympathize – but in the end grace prevails, and he submits gracefully to God’s will.

That grace was for his close companions, but it was also for us. The storm that lies just over the horizon will soon envelope Pilate’s court and the Hill of Golgotha, framing the three crosses with an ominous black background. But here, before the storm, Jesus offers the grace of God to his companions and to us, in the simple yet profound symbols of bread and wine.

We recognize this was and continues to be a holy act. We do approach the table with reverence, and with great appreciation for the depth of Christ’s suffering and sacrifice that we would be reconciled with God. Even so, as you approach the table, and eat the bread and drink the wine, hear in the background the table talk between Jesus and his disciples, hear the grace and mercy offered there not for stiff and artificial people but offered there for ordinary people like you and me – all part of the big, noisy, rambunctious family of the children of God. Hear the grace and mercy, and know it is for you. Dive in, and enjoy the feast prepared for us by the One who submitted so completely to God’s will, and in doing so providing us with the path to reconciliation with God and with each other.