

4th September 2011 12th Sunday after Pentecost

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Exodus 12: 1-14 ; Romans 13:1-10; Matthew 1:10-20

Why are we here? Is it to encounter God, or to meet with others we know? Or both?

Is there a connection between the love of God and the love and care we may have for one another? Are we more likely to be concerned for others' welfare if we believe there is a God who loves us and them?

Of course there are people of integrity and good will who cannot find God in their lives, yet commit themselves to others' needs. But the connection between seeing love as a fundamental feature of the world, finding ourselves to be loved by a gracious creator, and being enabled to give love to others in need is an intuitive one, and deeply compelling. As Christians we rejoice to be named after Jesus the lover of humankind and to be linked to people who have demonstrated costly love in practice – the Good Samaritan, Florence Nightingale, Mother Theresa.

So I wonder: Is this likely to be a place where God is present if we are not seen to have love for one another, or for the stranger?

The connection between these two aspects of love – love from God, love for others – is disputable, but deeply natural and it runs through all our readings today – readings which at first sight seem to have little to do with one another.

Consider first the strangeness and intensity of the Passover feast out of the story of Exodus – the image of families of Israelite slaves gathered by night behind closed doors, feasting together on roast lamb, with lamb's blood daubed on the doorposts and lintel, while God outside slays their enemies, the Egyptians – ready to be led forth through desert and sea to the land of promise.

It is a dark, strange image to ponder on, on a bright September morning. It speaks of a nation being born in a time of danger, delivered by divine power and promise out of danger into a place of freedom.

Passover remained a strange feast even when it became a regular part of Israel's religion, celebrated year by year in the spring as a reminder of this deliverance. Unlike all the other major parts of Old Testament

religion, this is not a Temple feast. It is a kind of sacrifice but it requires no temple, no priest, no altar: only a family gathered in their own home, under the family head – and not outdoors, in the daylight, but indoors, by night.

It carries with it echoes of Israel's nomadic life, when they were wandering herders of sheep and goats, huddling at night in tents against the dangers of the dark – before they settled in the land of Canaan to cultivate crops and build houses and shrines.

For a time, Passover became a Temple feast, a pilgrimage, for which people had to leave their homes and go up to Jerusalem but it was still celebrated there in families, gathered in houses in the city, or in tents on the surrounding hills; and when the temple was destroyed, Jews went back to celebrating in their own homes, as they do to this day.

It carries with it a deep folk memory of their beginning as a people under God. God the Protector who has chosen them as His people, who calls them to live before him in unity, and to tell the story of how God called them out of Egypt into freedom. Israel's sense of itself as a unified community is symbolised in the family gathered behind closed doors, and by the later lovely practice which gives a special and honoured role to the youngest child of the family, who has to ask the eldest, the head of the household, to retell the sacred story which gives meaning to it all, by asking: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The answer to that question unfolds the story of Israel's lived experience – of the love of God and their unity as God's people.

So it's a shock when we turn from that story of God's love for Israel against the nations to Romans 13, to hear Paul, a Jew, say to the Roman Christians "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God" - so big a shock that many have wondered if Paul really said it. This was Rome he was writing to, Rome under the vile emperor, Nero: how can he say Nero (who some Christians called the Anti-Christ) was appointed by God, as God's servant who Christians were duty-bound to obey?

It's a very dangerous passage, this, and much loved by autocrats and tyrants. The Russian Tsars (it is said) would not allow the Magnificat to be sung in their royal chapels with its talk of God's plan to "bring down the mighty from their thrones" but were quite happy to affirm with this passage that "the powers that be are ordained of God" and "whosoever resists authority resists God". It was used most notoriously by the so-called 'German Christian' movement in the 1930's to justify giving support to the Nazi government.

For us the problem may be that God and politics seem to belong in different boxes.

If you were a peasant in ancient Rome or 19th century Russia you might believe your rulers were appointed mysteriously by God, but there's not much mystery in the Single Transferable Vote (complexity, but not mystery). We know exactly how our rulers are chosen and for several reasons we are unlikely to see the hand of God there. Nor do our politicians talk about God much and we suspect them when they do.

And yet the hand of God can operate in government despite the shallowness of our political culture. Living in a democratic society is a blessing, and we should never cease giving thanks for that, for the fact that God has devolved on to us the power to experience divine responsibility to choose our rulers. With that in mind I hope we go to the polling booth not casually and cynically, but in fear and trembling – and if wrong choices are made I hope it encourages us not to blame but to repent.

So there is wisdom in Paul's words after all. The choosing of rulers is God's business in the end, however it happens and whether we can see it or not. This little group of Roman Christians were an easy target for official persecution. Now under Nero there were protests about taxation, and Paul's advice to them was to keep well out of it, tighten their belts and trust in God – who may have put Nero in place for now, but in the end (as he says in the verses which follow) God will wrap up this world order in his reign of peace.

So if we read it carefully, Paul's praise for pagan rulers is really an affirmation of his very Jewish faith in the overarching love and providence of God (just as much as the Passover story). And he tells his readers they will affirm this faith not by engaging in protests (which in their circumstances were dangerous and pointless) but by manifesting love in community.

That's why he turns suddenly from the world of politics outside to his vision of what a Christian community may look like inside. It's a community which shows, not only the negative values of not stealing, murdering or committing adultery (the kind of thing rulers can enforce) but beyond that the positive value of love: love which seeks the neighbour's good, whatever it is, and in doing so fulfils the Law of God.

If we feel we need concrete advice on what it means to love our neighbour as God loves us, we have excellent guidance in the Gospel passage in Jesus' parable of the shepherd who has a hundred sheep but leaves them all to wander, while he searches for the one who is lost and in danger. "Do not despise one of these little ones". Every community has its power-brokers and its "little ones." The sign of a true community is not the greatness of its leaders – however we measure that – but the care given to its least important members. Do we act like people who know that the centre of the universe is a heavenly Father/Mother who cares deeply, intimately for every single one?

And when things go wrong in communities, as they always will, we have excellent advice in Matthew's process of conflict resolution. "If someone sins against you, go and point out the fault". It's obvious, but so many things go wrong in communities when people don't say what's on their mind, when they nurture grudges and resentments, and mutter in corners, telling somebody else what the problem is and not the one who can deal with it. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was running a seminary for the underground church in Nazi Germany he made it a point of principle that if someone complained to him or anyone else about another member they had to go at once to that other person and sort it out. It was, he believed, the only way to keep relationships clean and clear and free of the poison of resentment and power struggles. More important, it enables the growth of trust. Every community has to have rules about what to do if that doesn't work – and Matthew gives his rules here – but such rules are seldom needed if love is allowed to operate through openness and honesty based on trust. When we do that we recognise each other, not as rivals (actually or even potentially) but as brothers and sisters in the family of a loving God.

I've been reflecting, with scripture, from different angles on a single truth, that the love of God is made actual in the gift and challenge of a human community.

So let me come back, finally, to where I started: to the Passover, because the symbolism of the Passover is invoked every time we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, which is a physical reminder of the love of God made actual in community.

As in the Passover, in the Eucharist we proclaim that God is here – not only here, of course, but recognisably and joyfully present to us and for us.

As in the Passover, we gather as a covenant community under God. When we share the sign of the Peace we acknowledge that differences

occur – because we are all different – and we seek the healing of God's peace as we gather and as we go out to share that peace beyond. And, as in the Passover, in the Eucharist we tell a story and we share a meal. It's a story and a meal which celebrate the loving action of God in Christ, who feeds us by his spirit day by day, and whose story continues into our story, and by God's grace continues through us into the lives of others.