

Palm Sunday B 2009

The Last Supper and the Cup of the Eucharist

Well, a long gospel deserves a short sermon. I'll do my best at that, but with only a modest hope of success.

The Passion Narratives are peculiar in a number of ways. First, they're probably the oldest part of the gospels to be composed as continuous narrative. In fact, the gospels have been described as Passion Stories with extended prologues. It's this story which was at the heart of early Christian life and worship. The story not only recounts the means of effecting our salvation, but also the origin of the chief act of Christian worship, the Eucharist.

The origin of the Eucharist is celebrated more particularly on Maundy Thursday than Palm Sunday, but I'm going to turn things a little topsy-turvy, and talk about one small point in the foundation narrative of the Eucharist. Before I do that, one more preliminary observation. Passion Stories, like most important pieces of ancient literature, were carefully written to have multiple layers. When you read a passion story you can expect to notice one thing at one time and a second the next and, perhaps, a third the following time. This has nothing to do your capacity to understand the story, it's an intention built in by the author(s), because that's how important ancient documents were written. They were written to be reread with the idea that the reader not be able to extract the entire meat of the passage in a single reading. After all, their comment was not, if it's worth doing it's worth doing well, but if it's worth reading, it's worth reading more than once.

So the Passion Narratives, in fact, most Biblical literature, needs to be approached remembering this characteristic of ancient documents. If it were a shopping list, you probably wouldn't need to reread it. But, as it's a gospel, which is intended to carry meaning, it would need to be read again and again. One needs to expect different facts to pop out of the background narrative. A document which, to the ancient reader, had one and only one clear meaning would have been a disappointing literary performance. Something which the contemporary church, in its search for clarity, needs to remember: sometimes clarity may not be the best way to communicate quite complex events and meanings. Clarity may even deceive one into thinking one understands. I, for one, do not find the human situation terribly clear and I resent those people who try to make it so and wonder what they are ducking.

OK. That's enough of that. Now, the one point I wish to draw to your attention about the narrative of establishing the Eucharist. Most translations of the text say that Jesus says, over the cup, "This is my blood which is poured out for you (meaning the immediate body of the disciples witnessing the event) and for many, (meaning the rest of the Christian community down through the ages).

There is, however, a possible glitch. In the Hebrew and Aramaic, the same combination of words, the very same combination of words, might just as well mean, ". . . and poured out for all." There is no grammatical, no lexical, no distinction in vocabulary, between "many" and "all". It is the choice of the translator as to which meaning is placed within the text. You will find in some Eucharistic Prayers, the Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican traditions, that the word "all" has come, in the last 20-30 years, to be used. This is an example of how the human tendency to divide ourselves into sheep and goats, into those who have made it and those who haven't, into those who are good at being good and those who are not so good at being good – sometimes this tendency

works its way back into our understanding of heaven. I deeply suspect it has no true place there.

God is love, period. Not a divider. When God acts, God acts for the salvation of everyone. The only possible non-salvation which might exist, comes from human beings refusing what is offered, not from God not offering. So when Jesus acts for the salvation of human beings, I think, theologically, as the representative of God, he is required to act for all. Therefore, "all" is the preferable translation. Now there may be great linguistic scholars who can dissect the case of things far more nicely than I, but here I feel the theological argument must be decisive. I also think that in interpreting the events of this week, of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, that it is important to remember that these things happen, not for the church, but for the creation, for all.

The church has had the human, egocentric, prideful, tendency to confuse being a witness to the acts of God with being the object of the acts of God. The church witnesses to what God has done for the creation. The church is not the objective of the actions of God. That, I think, is a rather key thing to remember when struggling with how to understand the life and death of Jesus.

Now, that's really all I have to say: The importance of getting the foundational perspective right on the events we're remembering this week. That foundational perspective is that God is active on behalf of the whole of creation. The church's job is not to think he's acting just for us, but to remember that we point out, as the Aramaic original to the Last Supper narrative probably said, that he is acting for all.

OK. That's enough of that.