

LOVE IN THE RUINS

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The Maundy Thursday celebration has been for me during these past years the most powerful of all liturgical days. In the texts appointed for today, we see Jesus in the extremities of life: celebrating his people's deliverance from bondage in Egypt during a period when his own nation was under Roman oppression. Even as he celebrates the freedom of his people, he is on the eve of being given to death by members of his own race and religion, if the texts are to be believed on that score. He is among his closest friends and followers, yet one of them subsequently betrays him and all deny and leave him to his own devices. During the evening there is the powerful experience of foot-washing, as well as a raging debate among his followers about who should be regarded as having the highest status among them.

In these texts, Jesus is both at the center and at the margin, supported and betrayed, acknowledged as leader yet having the character of his leadership misunderstood. Above all, in the extremities of his own death, and his own dying, he is portrayed in these texts as radically inaugurating and participating in an alternate way of living. In the ruins of his betrayal and brutal dying, he discovers and brings into being a new order and quality of shared living by which all humanity might be transformed.

As persons remembering and reflecting upon these matters, we are caught up in them and shaped by them. These stories bring into our lives the realities to which they point. It is the power of the elaborate imagination by which these stories are retained and work in the depths of our unconscious to shape and

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redirect our lives. Psychologically we know that grieving the loss of a significant figure takes a life-time, and that the grief process requires psychological elaboration of our memories of those persons. They become larger with time, and also find a natural place in our psychological economy. They are there as internalized resources and form very real and essential components of our identities, for good or ill. As inheritors of the Christian tradition, we have received centuries of imaginative elaboration of the circumstances of Jesus' death, and our identities, goals and relationships continue to be shaped and re-shaped by them. The shaping power of the love which emerged in the ruins of Jesus' passion and death extends to our lives today. Truly, by his death we are saved and continue to be saved from ruin.

One feature of these stories is to put his passion and death in the context of the Hebrews' liberation of bondage from Egypt, and in the context of the coming kingdom of God. At the extremities of life, Jesus recalls and participates in the liberating and transforming power of God. The story is larger than his own death. It is understood as a part of God's ongoing work to set people free, to bring to fulfillment the longing of the creation and all peoples for completion. As disciples, or learners, or participants in the drama of Jesus, our brother and leader, do we see our lives as participating in God's liberation of peoples? Or like Judas, do we betray these great events for something smaller and more self-serving? And like the disciples, do we become too preoccupied with our own status to be grasped by the larger call to participation in the transforming activity of God which challenges and negates our preoccupation with our own place in the scheme of things?

Another feature of these stories is the extent to which they demonstrate the capacity of political and religious forces to betray that which they are designed to protect and support. The gospels portray a thorough-going betrayal of Jesus' life and

ministry and person at the hands, not only of Judas, but of the government, the people and the leaders of his own religious tradition. The extent to which these texts are exaggerations, especially of the complicity of the religious leaders, does not belie the larger point well documented in Christian history that our religious institutions betray the principles and values and moral norms that we are called upon to embody. As inheritors of these stories, we must be aware that our lives, like Jesus', may be brought to ruins by the very governments and religious organizations which inspired our loving concern and promised support and protection as we live it out. Perhaps a Vietnam veteran could make this point better than I, or a whole host of others who are regarded as traitors and heretics for providing simple food and sanctuary for the world's dispossessed.

It also becomes clear that while these stories are very realistic about the way a life and ministry and person can be ruined by betrayal and cowardice and self-interest in the surrounding environment, they also generate a dimension of fellowship which is radical. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross did not note than one of the stages of dying included a foot-washing service! The point is not primarily how we ought to respond to others when we are in a terminal condition -- though there are some powerful insights to inform that situation as well -- but to reveal to us a way of living our days. In the foot-washing, Jesus makes it clear that we are to care for one another in the most basic of ways. Foot-washing was a sign of courtesy, care and hospitality. We are to be hosts to one another, to extend ourselves for the welfare of one another. To be givers and receivers of respectful and tender care. In the seminary context, as those participating in the inheriting and elaborating of these stories, we must struggle to develop a ministry of ideas, to discover the healing power locked in great truths and to find ways to wash one

another's feet rather than assault one another's minds and personalities with our viewpoints and convictions. Equally, we must be opposers of ideas which do not minister, but which elevate to power selected groups of people and injure and wound others. If the truth sets free, and freedom from bondage and oppression is at the center of the passion story, then our search for truth in the seminary context is an expression of foot-washing and loving participation in the kingdom of God which is coming.

These texts are powerful texts. They are living texts. They unlock powerful truths. They invite us, even demand of us, to view our lives in the context of the liberation of peoples. To insure that our religious communities do not betray the values they are called into existence to promote. And to find ways to minister rather than assault with our search for truthful understanding.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.
Praise God all creatures here around.
Praise God out there all heavenly hosts,
Praise Parent, Child and Holy Ghost. Amen.

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