

Thursday of the Lord's Supper
(Exodus 12:1-8,11-14 / 1Co 11:23-26 / John 13:1-15)
02.04.2015

The whole message of this day is one of freedom.

Those who assisted at this morning's Chrism Mass in the cathedral, at which the Holy Oils welcomed at the opening of this celebration were blessed, will have heard Jesus speak of His anointing for ministry in these terms: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives.*

This evening that message of freedom from slavery, liberation from servitude, resounds all the more poignantly in the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt.

What we celebrate in the Lord's Supper is the fulfilment of the gospel's promise of freedom for God's people. In Christ-Jesus' Passover salvation is accomplished and we are made beneficiaries of this great grace.

As we listen to this evening's reading from the Book of Exodus words of an eighteenth century rabbi, Moshe Chaim Luzatto, come to mind: *In the night of passover all that happened in Egypt renews and bestirs itself; and this itself helps to bring the ultimate redemption.*

As Christians we believe the *ultimate redemption* of which Rabbi Luzatto speaks has been won by Christ-Jesus and awaits to find fulfilment in each one of us.

It has been said: *Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt was an historical process entailing political and spiritual dimensions of freedom.*

I would say that what we are called to celebrate this evening goes further still than that.

It is an even more total freedom that is offered to us in Christ-Jesus and this freedom is for all peoples.

Speaking of the celebration of the Jewish Passover commemorated annually in the *Seder* meal - which is the context in which we are invited to understand the Last Supper - someone has written: *What we see signified in this celebration is that freedom becomes the first commandment.*

Freedom becomes the first commandment!

It is not an option, therefore, but an obligation!

As the song-writer put it, we were *born to be free.*

The Lord wills us to be free.

He commands us to claim our liberty.

He calls upon us to welcome the freedom He has won for us and offers to us as a gift to be received.

Our celebration of the Passover has for goal to see us enjoy that liberty which God originally intended for us.

It brings us back in time not only to the moment of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, but to the initial freedom enjoyed by our first parents, Adam and Eve, before the Fall.

With the Passover meal there is a sense of a new time starting.

This evening's celebration also speaks strongly to us of communion.

The breakdown in relationships which is the result of Adam and Eve's disobedience is healed and restored by Christ's gift of Himself in self-offering love.

In the exodus story we read how the community of Israel was to *come together* to celebrate the Passover meal.

In the same way, there is to be only one Table when Christian communities unite to remember Christ's saving death on Holy Thursday evening.

This evening's second reading was first addressed to the Christians of Corinth. We remember how Paul admonished this Christian community to overcome their divisions. They were not to hold themselves apart from each other at the Lord's Table.

The new commandment of freedom carries within it a call to responsibility, a call to serve. What is asked of us is to move beyond imposed servitude to freely chosen service.

Christ-Jesus sets the example we are to follow here.

The washing of the Feet - referred to as the *mandatum* (in Latin commandment) - is to be understood as the fulfilment of the *New Commandment*.

Jesus tells us to do for each other what He did for His disciples when He humbled Himself and stooped to wash their feet.

There is a parallel between the words *Do this in remembrance of me*, heard at the Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper (this evening's second reading), and the gospel's injunction *What I have done for you, you must do for each other*.

In the gesture He accomplished, washing his disciples' feet, Jesus gives flesh to His words: *I give you a new commandment. Love one another as I have loved you*. His gesture was imbued with love.

The call to solidarity with the poor is a hallmark of this day which is traditionally called *Maundy Thursday*.

On this day in Christian countries there was the custom of Maundy money being distributed to those in need.

The English Monarch's distribution of *maundy coins* in the United Kingdom on Holy Thursday morning is a quaint remnant of this ancient practice.

The sense of solidarity with the needy is present in the Jewish *Seder* meal.

When the People of God gather to commemorate the Passover they are reminded in the *Ha Lakhma Anya* that they themselves were a people in need in Egypt and that slavery is still a reality in today's world.

While some might be foolish enough to imagine that slavery ended with its abolition in 1833, the sad reality of our world today is that there are still many slaves.

It is estimated that there are between 21 and 29 million people being held in slavery at this moment in time.

There are about 2.4 million people being trafficked, according to United Nations figures.

There are also all those other forms of slavery known to us: addictions of all sorts, etc.

In Jewish homes where the *Seder* is celebrated the door of the house is to be kept open during the meal as a sign of ready welcome to those in need of both spiritual and material help.

As we gather here this evening, we should ask ourselves if the door of our hearts are open to receive into our midst those who are outside.

If we are to be faithful to the Lord's commandment we must be ready to welcome in and offer a place at the Lord's Table to all those who are in need of spiritual and material help.

If we are to be true to Jesus we cannot content ourselves to see anyone excluded from the feast.

There are many who feel themselves to be shut out, excluded from Church today, hindered from gathering around the Lord's Table with us, barred, as they are, from access to Holy Communion.

This sad state of affairs is because the whole Church is marred by sin.

It is not right to think only of the excommunicated as sinners.

The whole Church has its part of responsibility for the dramatic situation which is the exclusion of some.

Those who sit at the Lord's Table should not content themselves to think of *all being gathered in* as long as any are left outside.

The doors of the Church should never be locked. They should be, at the very least, left ajar, so that those outside who want to do so can find their way in.

Pope Francis is forever reminding us of the importance of being attentive to those who are marginalised and are made feel excluded.

He rightly insists that we should out to meet them where they are.

This evening, for that reason, he celebrated the Lord's Supper in a detention centre.

Christ's words come to mind: *Go out to the highways and byways, invite all those you find there into the feast.*

If we are to be faithful to Christ, we cannot sit here comfortable this evening at the thought that access to the Lord's Table is barred to some. We cannot be indifferent to their plight. Our hearts should not be hardened. We should not be self-satisfied or smug, as if it is by right that we sit here at the feast while others cannot.

The Lord wants to see all His scattered children gathered together. That includes all those who are wounded, battered, beaten, bruised and broken by life

I am conscious not only of the ecumenical considerations which hold Christians back from sharing in one Eucharist, but also of all those people who are under an impediment because of situations related to do their matrimonial status, sexual orientation or whatever.

Before the reality in which we find ourselves as Church/as Churches and personally, how should we react?

Despair is not the answer!

Hard-heartedness is not right!

Hope is the answer!

Attitudes of mercy and compassion, a dispensation of graciousness, a readiness to pardon and to give people a fresh start in life.

These are the gospel's answers to the plight of those who are victims of the multiple and varied human dramas in which so many people find themselves trapped, locked in a bondage comparable to the harsh oppression of slavery known to the Hebrews held captive in Egypt.

Just as the Jewish people await Elijah, the prophet, to herald the coming of the messiah for the establishment of the kingdom of God, so we must hope for the Christ who has come preaching liberty to captives, forgiveness for sinners, the healing of humanity's wounds, to make His presence felt in the Church which bears His name.

As the Cup of Elijah is blessed at the *Seder* Meal, the coming of the prophet, the messenger of final redemption and delivery from all forms of oppression, is hailed in this way: *Blessed be his presence - an inspiration for all of us and all of humanity.*

At this point those suffering are remembered with reverence: reverence, not pride-filled pity!

As we gather here for the Lord's Supper this evening, let us be faithful to the Lord's great commandment of love by remembering with reverence - yes reverence! - all those who for whatever reason cannot stand at or be fed at the Lord's Table in communion with us.

The *Seder* Meal ends with the fourth and final cup being lifted.
This cup is called *The Cup of Hope and of Freedom.*

I will bring this reflection to a close with that blessing.

*All lift the cup and say: we will partake of the fourth cup of wine, the cup of freedom.
It is a reminder of freedom, its hopes, struggles and dreams for so many enslaved nations and individuals.*

As committed children of God, we are called to witness to His precious gift and make it known to all peoples of the earth: those who seek justice, those who lack any rights and who long for freedom.

May we who were enslaved and are now set free come to hear anew for ourselves Christ's call to salvation.

In our turn, may we echo the Lord's freeing word to those who long for liberation.

By virtue of our baptism the Spirit which reposed upon Jesus reposes upon us.

We have been anointed to echo Christ's word: *liberty to captives, justice for all those who are victims of oppression.*

Amen!