

Listen! An ancient Jewish text has just been discovered! And because I had a good friend growing up who was Jewish, and I learned a few words in Yiddish, and because I saw FIDDLER ON THE ROOF twice, oh vey! I figured I ought to be able to decipher it! So here's what I think it means! After the Israelites had fled slavery in Egypt and the waters of the Red Sea had parted into a temporary Peakway, Pharaoh and his army had been drowned, the mountain was smoking and trembling, and the people were told to gather for worship. And they began to grumble:

--I don't like the music! I liked that tambourine song that Miriam sang right after we crossed the Sea. How come we don't sing that song anymore? And why doesn't anyone play the tambourine?

--This service is too long. Three days is inconvenient and the kids have soccer practice. I'm going with the Hittites, they do 2-day worship services.

--I like it when Aaron leads worship; he's the better preacher. And he has good opening jokes. How come Moses has to be the worship leader? He's always doing those stupid 3 points. It's boring!

--These new vestments don't speak to my generation. I liked the old ones better. Oh vey! And we're still kvetching 3 millennia later.

First, a little bit of background on the gospel. In response to the disciples' question about where Jesus wants them to make preparations to celebrate the Passover meal, Jesus sends them into the city. His directions are very detailed, including who they will meet, what they should say, and what they will be shown. This amount of prediction cannot be attributed to human foresight or calculation. It is another instance of Jesus' ability to see into the future because of His perfect alignment with God's plan. Also, this amount of prediction highlights the importance of the Passover meal, which will be celebrated in this Upper Room.

This journey into the city parallels an earlier episode of 2 disciples journeying to a village with specific instructions to find a colt for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Both episodes give the disciples firsthand experience of Jesus' ability to predict the course of events. These experiences were meant to reinforce the disciples' understanding and commitment to earlier predictions of Jesus. In particular, Jesus has predicted His passion, death, and resurrection three times. Each time the disciples have not been able to grasp it. Once the narrator simply observes they did not understand but were afraid to ask questions (Mk 9:32); once Peter tried to disabuse Jesus of any scenario that had suffering and rejection in it (Mk 8:31); and once James and John responded as if Jesus had never mentioned suffering and rejection by making a pitch for power and glory in Jesus' upcoming kingdom (Mk 10:32-34) The lesson for the disciples is: if Jesus is right about the man carrying the jar, the owner of the house, and the Upper Room, maybe He is right about suffering, death and resurrection.

The events unfold as Jesus predicts. They meet a MAN carrying a water jar. Water was generally carried on the head. This would be most unusual and so he would be easy to spot. Only women carried water with a jar – which was for the family's consumption. A MAN would carry a skin of water for his own personal use. They ask the owner of the house "The teacher asks, 'Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" They are to speak in Jesus' voice as a teacher. The more normal question would be, "Do you have a room where my disciples and I could eat Passover?" But Jesus' phrasing suggests a providential arrangement. It has already been decided and the owner has been waiting for the question to be

asked. Once again, the events that are unfolding are not haphazard. A divine plan is afoot. (adapted from John Shea, FOLLOWING LOVE INTO MYSTERY, p. 208-209)

OK, so what does any of this have to do with CORPUS CHRISTI – our Feast of the Body & Blood of Christ? I'd like to place all of this in the context of our Sunday worship. And I'd like us to appreciate more deeply that when we gather for the Eucharist, something divine is afoot – something far beyond us.

Frequently the complaint is made that the weekend Eucharist is boring and devoid of a vital connection to life. Immediately, the temptation is to respond by attempting to make our Eucharists more lively, more interesting, more full of song, more joyous. This often just compounds the issue rather than solves it. However good these things are in themselves, the root of the complaint is that, good singing and better homilies notwithstanding, in the end real life remains untouched.

Why?

Langdon Gilkey commented that the task of Christian worship is not to celebrate the God of special religious places, but the God of ordinary everyday places. This is equally true regarding ourselves. Worship must not just celebrate the heart that people feel they should bring to religious places, but the heart as it beats in ordinary places. Ordinary places contain some joy and some gratitude, but they are also filled with bitterness, suspicions, pettiness, paranoia, jealousy and more than enough guilt.

We come together from ordinary places with these things partially paralyzing the joys of our hearts and, as we sit listening to the Word and gather around the altar, these things do not automatically disappear. Our Eucharists, like our homes and places of work, are filled with all the problems that we personally are filled with. We stand around the Eucharistic altar with the same wounds we bring to our dinner tables.

Worship, then, is meant not just to celebrate our joys and gritudes; its task is also to break us open, to make us groan in anguish, to lay bare our paranoia and to lessen the jealousies and the distance that sit between us. Here we are asked to be vulnerable before each other, to forgive and embrace each other. Bitterness, hatred and suspicion are supposed to disappear, and liturgy is supposed to help that happen.

It is on this point that our Eucharists are most anemic.

What is wrong generally is not that people do not sing and dance, but that we do not break down. There is too little anguish in our Eucharists.

To become one heart with each other involves anguish, the painful letting go of paranoia, selfishness, bitterness, hurt, jealousies, pettiness, narrowness of vision, aggressiveness, and all those things which keep us apart. Any of us who have ever put a friendship or marriage back together after it has ruptured know how difficult this is to do. And we are talking here about a COMMUNITY of relationships, not just a single friendship or marriage.

If our Eucharists do not succeed in breaking down the barriers that separate us from each other, then we can never hope to succeed in breaking down those same barriers in the world. As Jim Wallis put it: "in worship, the community is edified.....if it does not edify itself here, it certainly will not do so in daily life, nor in the execution of its ministry to the world."

Christ was effective because He was vulnerable. He was also often in anguish.

It is interesting that the only ritual that Christ asks us to repeat over and over again is the Eucharist. In it we remember Him as broken, poured out, empty, heartbroken, frightened, humiliated, vulnerable, in anguish. To celebrate this ritual properly we need to have in our hearts what Christ had in His at the first Eucharist. What was He feeling then?

Joy and thanksgiving, yes. Love for those at table with Him, surely. But beyond this, His heart felt anguish, deep longing and fear at the prospect of the pain that was now a certainty before intimacy and community could be achieved.

It would perhaps do all of us good occasionally when we leave the Eucharist, instead of going to a lively meal with the folks, to go off as Jesus did after the first Eucharist, to a lonely place to have an agony in the garden and to sweat some blood as we ask for the strength to drink from the real chalice – the chalice of vulnerability.

Occasionally when St. Augustine handed the Eucharist to a communicant, instead of saying ‘The Body of Christ,’ he would say “Receive what you are.” Augustine had perceived correctly that the words of consecration, “This is my body, this is my blood” are intended more to change the people present than to change the bread and wine. For him it was more important that the people became the real presence of God, that they became food and drink for the world, than that the bread and wine did.

That is, in fact, the real task of the Eucharist: to change us, to create out of us fragile creatures, the real presence of Christ in our broken and hurting world.

But this involves a painful breaking down of all that keeps us apart. At a Eucharist we may not protect ourselves. Our hurts and hates must be revealed and absorbed. When this happens, hearts of stone will turn to hearts of flesh, bitterness to love, stinginess to generosity.

But livelier liturgies, better homilies and more singing will not, by themselves, bring that about. The complaint that liturgy is meaningless goes deeper. At its root lies the fact that people will celebrate as a community only when self-protectiveness, mutual suspicion and macho posturing are first broken down. But that requires new birth, humility, conversion, and a change of heart. It means we cannot say “This is just who I am; I’m not changing.”

In birth, there are tears and anguish. Before the real dance comes the anguish. May we die to self and selfishness – that we might be reborn to dance for God and His world. Amen. (Adapted from FORGOTTEN AMONG THE LILIES, Ronald Rolheiser, p. 181-184)