

Enterprise Holy Thursday (4/13/06)

“The Lifeblood of Faith”

Exodus 24:3-8 Mark 14:12-26
I Corinthians 10:16-17

Blood is life. Without it, you cannot live. Did you notice that blood is mentioned in all our scripture lessons for this Maundy Thursday? Let me share with you an illustration that points up how essential blood is to life.

The Battle of Shiloh in 1862 was a monumental struggle in the American Civil War. Named for a small Methodist Church, which just happened to be on the battlefield, and which was used as headquarters by generals from both sides, Shiloh was bloodier than all the previous American wars put together. The Confederate forces were commanded by Albert Sidney Johnston, whom Jefferson Davis considered at that time to be the finest general the South had.

After leading a charge against the enemy, General Johnston returned to his own lines showing evidence of several near misses. His uniform had one or two holes from bullets, and one of his boots had its sole half shot off. Nevertheless, Johnston quipped, “They didn’t trip me up this time.” But Johnston had suffered a wound. It was not really very massive, but a bullet had severed an artery behind his knee, and the life blood was spilling out of him quickly. When Johnston finally realized he was hurt, it was too late. An aide couldn’t find the wound, until he noticed that one boot was full of blood. No one knew how to stop the flow of blood, and Albert Sydney Johnston bled to death on the field at Shiloh.

Blood is life. Without it, you cannot live. Blood is central in all our scripture lessons for this Maundy Thursday. The idea of Moses throwing blood on the people of Israel may be rather repugnant to us, but we need to remember the symbolism. In all reality, Moses was pouring life onto the people. Blood is sacred because God is the giver of all life, and blood has the power to atone. This blood ritual described in Exodus 24, then, is a sacrament which established a bond of life between God and people, and among the people. It is comparable in the deepest sense to the sacramental participation in the blood of Jesus, which conveys forgiveness to the participants and thereby establishes a bond of life between the faithful and God, while at the same time binding the faithful to one another.

In painting the scene of the Crucifixion, many classical artists have depicted a skull at the base of the cross, upon which the blood of Jesus flowed. It was not just any old skull, nor a mere representation that Golgotha was “the place of a skull.” The artists depicted a tradition that Jesus died immediately over Adam’s grave, and the blood of the Savior thus enlivened the dead bones of the sinner—and thereby of all fallen humanity.

St. Paul tells us that our communion is a participation in the blood and body of Christ—that is, in the life the resurrected Christ shares with us. Therein lies our most significant source of rejoicing. Through our sharing in this meal, not only do we experience the saving effects of the sacrificial death of Christ, but also we become one with Christ in a real sense. Unlike the disciples in the upper room, who had no clue as to how the story would turn

out, we know that the cross is not the end but the necessary means to the end. Even though we recount on this night the events of betrayal, arrest, and trial, we are not somber. God prepares a table for us. A table connotes feasting, and feasting implies joy.

Tonight we confront the same messenger of death who greeted us on Ash Wednesday; but with the Lenten discipline largely behind us, we can begin to laugh at grim old death. For we know now how short is that tyrant's reign—and how great is the gift of life that awaits us.

This night we come to give thanks and to rejoice. We thank God for the extravagant love and life that he has poured out over us through the sacrifice of Jesus. We rejoice in our hope of resurrection, assured that the victory of Jesus over sin and death and hell is our victory, too, through faith in our Lord. As we remember what Jesus did for us, and as we marvel at the magnitude of his unselfish love, which enabled him to pour out his lifeblood for us, we pray for that same gift of love, so that we can be the Body of Christ, redeemed by his blood, and committed to serving the world. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.