

It's time for one of my quizzes – I'll give you the quotation and you tell me the person and occasion:

- “It doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land.” (MLKing Mountaintop speech)
- I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of the Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. (A. Lincoln – Springfield Farewell)
- Today marks my final roll call with you. But I want you to know that when I cross the river, my last conscious thoughts will be of the Corps, and the Corps, and the Corps. (MacArthur, West Point Farewell)

There are occasions, like these, when the awareness of life-changing or life-ending events are so evident to an individual that they are able to seize the moment and capture an essential message that will forever touch the hearts of those who experience it. For Jesus and his followers, it was a Passover meal in Jerusalem.

Jesus had to know that this visit to Jerusalem was different. All week long he had been hounded by the opposition. First there was the question about his authority – by what right he was engaged in his ministry. Then there was the question about paying taxes to Caesar, followed quickly by a question about life after death. Luke even tells the readers that there was a plot to put Jesus to death, and Jesus must have known about it because of all the careful preparations he made.

Listen again to our Gospel reading. Jesus tells Peter and John to get the Passover meal ready and they ask where he wants them to get it ready – Then this – Go into the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you – follow him into the house that he enters – then say to the owner of the house, “The Teacher says ‘ where is the room where my disciples and I will eat the Passover meal?’” If that is not the pre-arranged, shadowy move of a mystery novel, I don’t know what is. Jesus knows how dangerous it is for him to be in the city and has carefully, secretly, prepared a place to celebrate Passover together.

The bread and wine would be there, herbs, and a properly prepared lamb – one certified by the priest as unblemished and properly slain (with no bones broken and drained of blood, some of which would be smeared on the door as a reminder of the Exodus). With this account of the stealthy trek to a furtive upper room, where Jesus and the disciples gather in secret, we set the scene of the Last Supper. For Luke, it is the classic occasion of farewell by a leader to his followers.

His words on this occasion are so well known that it is now possible to hear them, almost from memory and no longer understand their full significance. “He took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it and gave it to them saying, “this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way, he gave them the cup after the supper, saying, “This cup is God’s new covenant sealed with my blood, which is poured out for you.”

What we sometimes forget, since our Jewish heritage regarding the Passover is no longer a part of our memory. So, the first thing we need to remember is that Passover was and is a forward-looking meal. It anticipated the beginning of a journey to the promised land. Jesus wants his followers to be thinking about that time when God's kingdom is fulfilled, and the journey begins tonight. The Passover lamb was the seal of the covenant with a God who set them free from slavery. So, this new covenant is being offered to the faith community by the God who sets people free – Jesus' blood seals the covenant and offers a new kind of freedom – from sin and death – and that freedom will be fully realized when they reach the Promised Land.

And here's the other key ingredient – those who share in the covenant are joined to one another – life to life – sealed in the sharing of the cup from which they all sip. The whole basis of congregational life is contained in this event as we become members, one of another – vital parts of one body in Christ. Then, in true, farewell address fashion, Jesus talks to the disciples about what that life together will be like and his words are sobering, even today.

Martin Luther King encouraged his followers not to give up on the dream and to work for civil rights and peace for everyone. For Abraham Lincoln, it was to encourage the preservation of the union and the end of slavery. For Douglas MacArthur it was to preserve for all soldiers for all time the responsibility of Duty, Honor and Country. Jesus shares these words with us.

Reporting that the one who will betray him just shared the cup from which they drank, which created a commotion among the disciples as each doubted the others in the group, Jesus reminds us that love of place and power and doubts about the faith and loyalty of others in the group will continue to plague the church. In the midst of such discussions and tendencies, Jesus calls the members of his body to be those who serve. Each time we gather around this table, these words on humility and service are given to us as a reminder that true exaltation is God's gift to those who have entered into this covenant and endured the hardships of following Christ.

Such faithfulness will not be easy. Jesus predicts accelerated activity by Satan who is always looking for an opportunity to undermine God's work. And if you think that is not true, then talk to those whose lives are fully engaged with the kinds of ministry that Jesus extended to the poor or on hot-button social issues or among social outcasts, or among the morally or physically diseased. Opponents appear all the time in both overt and covert form from poor compensation to limited resources that would have welcomed the crumbs from the recent corporate bailouts. Who will lead these ministries in the face of such challenges when the leader is gone? You and me – the heirs of Peter and James and John and the others.

Christian leaders are not exempt from fear, doubt, discouragement and repeated testing by Satan, but they are also supported by prayer – Jesus himself is praying for us – and through humility and forgiveness Jesus promises we will find the grace and strength we need to continue. And that is why this Lenten journey, is so important. It reminds us of

the difficulties of following Jesus, the ways in which society and cultural change cannot be counted on to support our Christian values and our traditions. We must carve out the time, we must establish and re-establish our values in life. We must find the ways to strengthen our togetherness as a community and support each other in the struggles we face.

I encourage you then, to listen to this farewell address of our Lord and renew your commitment to the covenant he made with us. Through repentance and forgiveness, let us once again discover the grace and strength that our Lord gives to us through these gifts of bread and wine and prepare for all that forces that will seek to crucify the new life we have been given through Christ our Lord.

Amen.