

Sunday 3rd April 2022
Lent 5 Evensong (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: 2 Chronicles 35.1-6,10-16
NT: Luke 22.1-13

Different churches worship in different ways, but all are ritualistic (although some of them deny it). Whether it is evangelical worship where people turn up in extremely casual clothing and jig up and down to loud music, or whether it is the more rehearsed formality of a Sunday morning service here or at the Cathedral, or whether it is this service of Choral Evensong, they are all heavily ritualized – a point proven by the fact that anyone turning up in any of those three scenarios would usually know what was going to happen before they got there.

Both our readings today are focused on the ritual surrounding the Passover meal. Let us be clear that this is not related to the Christian celebration of the Eucharist as the Passover is not something we should appropriate. However, all meals have their rituals, and in our Old Testament reading the significance of the ritual is that King Josiah is restoring worship of Yahweh in Israel. Josiah had a revered place in the history of Israel because of the rediscovery of the Law: even if you didn't feel particularly moved by the detail given in the reading, the detail was important because it set the standard for what was expected in future worship. It therefore linked directly to the New Testament reading when we heard Jesus making preparations for the Passover meal with his disciples.

For some people, ritual is a sign of superficiality. I'm sure that you have heard the arguments that turning up to church every week and participating in a ritual cannot in itself further your chances of heaven, that ritualized worship is not real worship. Let us look at that more

carefully, and in particular reflect on the nature of Jewish ritual which is at the heart of the readings. Jewish religion and practice is focused on the home and the family more than it is on the synagogue. The weekly Shabbat meal is not a solemn time of worship, but a moment where a household sits down together. It begins with the singing of Shalom Aleichem celebrating the angels visiting the home on a Friday evening, and although other psalms and prayers can be part of the meal, the focus is on talking, which accompanies the rituals with bread and salt. Many of you will have seen the television comedy *Friday Night Dinner* which brilliantly normalized the Shabbat meal in the context of dynamic family relationships. The script often refers to the fact that the family is Jewish, and there is occasional mention of the fact that the Friday night dinner is special, but no mention is ever made of it being a Shabbat meal. However, very frequently you will see in view on the screen a plate of basket with Challah bread for use in the meal. The fact that no reference is ever made to this is, to my mind, a superb example of the normalization of different religious practices in mainstream media and culture.

If we take religion out of the mix and just stick with our family rituals, then we can often see that ritual is what binds relationship. In my own family this has been particularly important this week. Like every family, we have rituals, and we have certain moments every day when we come together and talk. These are principally breakfast, a cup of tea when we all return to the house later, and then at 6pm an aperitif. After dinner we then separate for homework etc, but then reassemble for a cup of tea at 9pm. This week Jerome has had COVID and so we have banished him from our sight: with no effort we have maintained the rituals but over Zoom (apart from breakfast!). At 6pm every evening we place outside his door a bowl of stuffed olives and a few breadsticks and dips, and then join him by Zoom. This sounds mildly comic when I say it now, but in fact it is this ritual which is preserving

normality and keeping relationships strong. Although it sounds a bit like feeding time at the zoo, in fact it is a way of showing love and support for each other when life is a bit tough.

So ritual becomes not just the knowledge of what happens next and a choreographed set of actions to get there, but actually also a highly relational act. In the certainty of the drama there is space to express yourself. And that is also at the heart of a church service in whatever ritual tradition you wish. The ritual is there to bring people together and to create the space for interaction and relationship. Within church this is a relationship with each other but also with God. As with our own families and friends, we are not always in the mood for a gushing outpouring of thoughts to those around us, and so the relationship with God is not always lived out in some spiritual reverie. Rather, like the normalization of the Shabbat meal in a Channel 4 comedy, our relationship with God is one which is normalized through ritual. Our faithfulness to ritual (which could be worship in many different styles) is very often our way of checking in with each other, and finding a way of having that conversation.

At the heart of our Christian ritual is, of course, the Eucharist. The words of institution, and the narrative around what happened at Jesus' Last Supper (which of course we associate with the time of the Passover) are the ritual which has been given to us and passed down. Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, blessed and broke it, before sharing it with the disciples around him. And he did the same with the wine. This simple ritual has been repeated so many millions of times and in different styles: on each occasion it is not a superficial event, but an expression of the fundamental presence of Jesus in all of our relationships and in our very being. Just as our family rituals are expressions of relationship, even when we are out of sorts or not focused on them, so the eucharistic ritual remains real, dynamic, and full of

hope even when we are gazing blankly at it because we are too tired or too preoccupied. Before today is out, you will perform countless more rituals, from eating a meal through to brushing your teeth. Rituals are rarely superficial, but they are a way of expressing ourselves without words. Let's keep talking, to God and to each other!

Fr Crispin Pailing