

ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו מלך עולם. בורא פרי הגפן

EASTER SUNDAY:
Saint Odilia

“Blessed are you, Lord, our God, king of all creation, you have created the fruit of the vine.” These are the first words of the Passover Kiddush, the solemn blessing of the Passover Seder. They were sung last Wednesday evening, the 14th day of the month of Nisan, just after Sundown, sung by the father of the family about to sit at table to eat the Passover meal. The Passover Seder is the longest, continuously celebrated religious ritual in human history, 3800 years. It was observed for the first time before the Exodus, that water-shed event when God acted in history to free the people from bondage and lead them to the promised land. But the celebration of that meal has lasted as long as it has because it embodies the burning desire of human beings of any and every age to be free.

Nearly two millennia ago on the evening of 14th day of the month Nisan, the Rabbi Jesus sat at table with his disciples to celebrate the Passover meal, a ritual already ancient in his day. In the course of that meal he spoke new words of interpretation over the cakes of unleavened bread and over the third cup of wine: **“TAKE AND EAT, THIS IS MY BODY.... THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE COVENANT, WHICH WILL BE SHED ON BEHALF OF MANY FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS.”** In so doing, Jesus took a meal sacred to Jews and made it sacred meal for all people of all cultures and all times until the end of time. In a meal eaten among friends, Jesus gave himself to us forever as food for life that does not end.

In Luke’s Gospel in the account of his Transfiguration, he speaks with Moses and Elijah about his Exodus that he is about to accomplish in Jerusalem. Easter is the celebration of the Passover of the Lord, his passage from this world to the Father. We remember his Exodus in such a way that its pattern is reflected in our lives. Jesus does not return to the

presence of the Father alone, but at the head of a whole redeemed people, whom he has made his own brothers and sisters, beloved sons and daughters of that same heavenly Father. Jesus' triumph over the bondage of sin and evil is ours as well; his liberation from the slavery of fear is ours as well; his freedom from death is ours as well; his rising to new life, life eternal, life forever, is our rising as well. All of this is the result of one thing only: the mysterious and redemptively tender love of God for us.

Too often in the past many of us encountered images of God that filled us with fear, anxiety and apprehension. We have this idea that God is an all seeing eye who carries a scorecard and never rests. Our image of God is of one always watching and waiting, waiting and ready to pounce the minute we step out of line, gleefully announcing the sentence on the hapless sinner: eternal damnation in hell. **“We have twisted the gospel of grace into religious bondage and distorted the image of God into an eternal, small-minded bookkeeper,” as one author put it.**

We need to become more acquainted with images of God taken from the Scriptures and from our worship. The only lasting freedom comes from a profound awareness that God loves us as we are, that he loves us beyond worthiness or unworthiness, beyond faithfulness and infidelity, he loves us without caution or regret, without boundary or limit or breaking point. No matter what we do, we cannot stop God from loving us. Once we come to such a realization, then it no longer becomes a matter of what I have to do. It is what God has done for me in Jesus that inspires us on our journey to ask what more can I do in response to the love I have been shown. At that point we want to alter our lives, we want to undergo a truly profound conversion and lasting change because we have come face to face with love itself, as so many saints, holy women and men down through the ages. That is what we celebrate on this most holy day, and every Sunday, every day.

This realization, this celebration, our liturgies and our feasts, our holy

seasons can have a profoundly significant, even crucial, impact on the way we live. We live at a time and in a culture that would establish bondage and slavery to the some new Pharaohs: for example, hedonism, the idea that happiness can be found in unrestricted devotion to pleasure; or materialism, the belief that happiness can be found in things, in possessions, in wealth, in conspicuous consumption; or nationalism, that suggests that safety, salvation, rests with the largest military and a nuclear arsenal. In this time of forced isolation, we come face to face with how useless all these things are in the face of an invisible enemy, when all we have to rely on to get through this crisis is one another, those on the journey with us.

I have practical suggestions. I subscribe to The Mayo Clinic Health Letter, and in one issue there was an article called “Searching for what Matters.” The researchers found that greater levels of religion and spirituality were associated with better self-reported physical, mental and social health. The researchers noticed improving physical symptoms with fatigue and pain, reduction of feelings of anxiety and depression, and improvement in the quality of relationships and social involvement. In short, spiritual growth was associated with better health. On the other hand spiritual distress was related to lower levels of perceived health.

The authors suggested some things for better health, things that we can do now when we have time because of forced inactivity: (1) Reflect. Take a moment think about yourself and the path your life has taken. What are the things that really mattered; what’s important to you? (2) Allow for the Struggle. Give yourself permission to wrestle with questions and emotions and the fears you are experiencing now. Name them, face them; (3) Find Beauty. The beauty of nature can inspire us to awe and reverence. There is also art and music. They can often capture what cannot be expressed in words; (4) Connect. Relationships are critical to good health. We want to love and be loved, to belong and to cherish. Now we have to

do so by electronic means, but we are able to do so in this way not possible in ages past. And when you are able, come to Church; join a parish. Here is community committed to hospitality, to comforting and mutually supporting one another on the journey home even in the midst of struggle.

Through the seasons, the feast days, the rituals, the Church is trying to initiate us gradually, progressively, ever more intensely into the Passover mystery, into the dying and rising of Jesus. We are not celebrating the anniversary of these climactic events in the life of Jesus. We are celebrating these things in order to participate in the mystery, the mystery of good conquering evil, of life triumphing over death, the mystery of the God of love who gives life that does not end.

Our prayer and our worship this Easter is filled with hope and joy because we know that things aren't always going to be this way. The real battle has already been won in Jesus. Our freedom from despair and the powers of evil and death has been accomplished in his gift of self in obedience to the will of the Father. As children of the light we are able to live in freedom. We are privileged to continue the announcement of God's great love for us shown in the resurrection to life. Believe what you hear. Proclaim what you believe. Put into practice what you believe. That solemn blessing of the Passover meal concludes this way: BLESSED ARE YOU, LORD OUR GOD, KING OF ALL CREATION. YOU HAVE GIVEN US LIFE. YOU HAVE SUSTAINED US. YOU HAVE BROUGHT US TO THIS FEAST." God give you and your families a blessed Easter, the promise of an eternal Easter in the divine presence forever.

יהוה אלהינו מלך העולם שהחינו וקיימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה