Pesach and Easter

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I will speak from my experience. Long before I was ordained an Anglican priest, I was already in the habit of organising visits to different Houses of Worship. One was to a synagogue, with Pesach not far away.

I remember an earnest young man, studying to be an RE teacher, asking the lady kindly showing us around a beautiful synagogue, what was the feel of Passover/Pesach for her. What feeling bubbled up for her? She said:

“To be honest: exhaustion. It is such a tiring time. There are so many preparations, so much to take care over, and all to a deadline.”

I admired her candour. And I have to say: I have never heard anybody speak that frankly about a major festival before or after. Well, until now. Because I will say something that mirrors that wise woman’s words.

My awareness that Holy Week and Easter Day are just around the corner for me fills me with some excitement, yes, and also a lot of stress. Let me say that I don’t resent the stress. I think the whole journey (from Palm Sunday, to the Upper Room, to the Cross, to the Grave, to the Beyond) is worth doing. It is worth doing, even if the people doing it (including me) aren’t yet experts in meditative contemplation. We might and do need to do our festivals collectively, just as we are. It is okay if our first response is busyness and stress.

Along with all the stresses, what is nevertheless my personal highlight? It is perhaps different every year; I never know what is going to “hit” me with force. But more often than not, it is for me, as a Western Christian, the singing of the great hymn, sung in the presence of the Easter Candle, the “Exsultet” (which means “Rejoice!”).

This is a triumphant/triumphal hymn. It is a song of triumph, not – to be fair – against any other people, but against sin and death. One of its lines says:

“This is our Passover Feast…”.

This is something I have had to give much thought to over recent years. In England, and in the Church of England, something of a pattern grew up over recent decades, of having “Christian seders” on or around Maundy Thursday (Holy Thursday). Believe it or not, this was often and at times still is something that is thought to aid Jewish-Christian relations, and help Christians get in touch with their “Jewish roots”. The objections have come to the fore: the Jewish “seder” is in fact a whole *order* - a whole *pattern* - of engaging with the themes of liberation and exodus. And as such it is in no small part later than the time of Jesus. We know (we might think) the bare basics of how Jesus celebrated the Passover. But we don’t know we can call that a “seder”. And we do know we cannot call it a “seder” - as the Rabbis’ “seder” was and is a seder. It is both false “appropriation”, and is simply bad history, a-historicity.

By the way, one thing I know is that churches which have had this, love it. They love the informality and family feel of a “seder”. Some, then, have (I think wisely) moved on from any language of

“Christian seder” to an “Agape meal” in Holy Week – a genuinely Christian gathering which makes no reference to Jewish terminology of frames of reference.

Back to the Exsultet. The refrain that repeats actually says: “This is the night…”. It occurs at least four times. It is musically more developed at each iteration.

Here I am influenced by this book: James Falwell: *This is the Night: Suffering, Salvation, and the Liturgies of Holy Week* (2005, London/NY: T&T Clark).

Falwell’s argument is that we have to take seriously the range of meanings of these words. They mean more than one thing. Yes, this is the night when we cross from slavery to freedom, from death to life. On that the liturgy is explicit. It happens that the original stories lend themselves to a night-time setting. So we do that too.

But! But that is only part of it. The other side is that in saying or singing, repeatedly: “This is the night”, we are – frankly – acknowledging that we do all of this, while we are still in the night, meaning the darkness of pain, and suffering, and worse.

The difference that the “triumph” of Easter makes is not that the night is obliterated. It is not thrown away. It is rather that this intervention of God happens in the midst of the night of human pain. And it changes but does not take away the pain.

It is important to be clear about the both-and here:

it both makes all the difference,

and it makes a difference which is hidden, elusive, not evident, hinted-at.

Let me return to my theme of candour. In truth, I have never gone through Holy Week and Easter thinking: “Here is triumph. At last, all is solved. All I have to is hold onto this story, and I will experience miraculous Newness of Life in my life, and/or the world will experience that Shalom. While there was a problem, now the problem has been solved.” No. Not that. That has – again, in truth – never been credible.

But rather I have always had some sense that “This is the night…”. This is and remains the night... and yet the night is not like the night of night. It is also, somehow, lit up. And so – somehow – everything is changed.

I could feel – and here is yet more candour – very cheap, offering this here. I say: “Yet somehow… yet somehow” and it is of course fair to ask me to explain what I mean. Am I actually saying anything that has real content? My feeling is like the feeling that I had when the synagogue guide answered the question honestly. Just as Pesach and Easter are about stress and deadlines, so they “just are” also are about a fulfilment and a hope and a change… that we haven’t quite grasped yet, and… this is okay.

This is the Night… and this is enough.

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