

September 6th 2020

Ex 12:1-14; Mt 18:15-20 – Rev. André Stephany

The blood was dripping. Blop, blop, blop. They were sitting in silence and listening intently. Their hearts were beating faster and faster and faster and then, suddenly... What was that? Was it him? What do you think? Was it him? Passing by, passing over? Was it him and if it was would he pass or stop?

What a horrible night that must have been, both, for the Israelites and for the Egyptians. The Israelites were told they had to stay in their houses and not leave what so ever; not by their public health official, but by Moses. They were told exactly what to do there: slaughter a lamb and prepare it in a certain way and most important, put the blood on the door posts of their houses.

Each family separated from their brothers and sisters in faith, from their friends, but all strangely united when sharing this very special meal; all united by that frightening but also consoling presence of God. Does this sound familiar? Some of us are still not back here, united with family and friends and are joining us online, and we all have made our experience with isolation now. Distant, but united by an invisible bond.

Jews around the world remember this event as Passover. They celebrate it every year following a strict ritual. They remember this special dinner with its very detailed recipe. A special dinner indeed...

How many people died after your last dinner party because of your cooking?

What a horrible night that must have been for the Egyptians who lost all their first-born children. While it was vital for the Israelites to keep to their dinner recipe, it wasn't good for the Egyptians at all. What is good for the ones is not always good for the others.

Among the Israelites, this night was one of the few occasions when they were united, despite being separated and locked into their houses, they were united like they had never been before and like they would not be again very often.

They were united by a common threat and by a shared hope; the hope that their God would not abandon them but act as their protector.

As soon as the Israelites had managed to flee from Egypt and come into the desert, however, this unity was gone. Poor Moses, such a complaining bunch... They wanted nothing more but fleeing from Egypt, but as soon as they were out of town, they kept telling Moses how lovely it had been in Egypt and they did not know why he lead them away from there into the wilderness.

The wilderness. The wilderness is a place of danger, fear, uncertainty, quick changes of mood between hope and despair, disorientation. Each of us has their times of being in the wilderness and each Church has her times of being in the wilderness. The leaving of a rector can lead into such a wilderness. A global pandemic can lead into a wilderness.

Different people deal differently with this experience and there are usually different ideas and views which might be the right way to go forward and it can either lead to a stronger sense of unity or people start feeling detached from the group and either fall behind and break away silently or start making noise. Moses did not like noise.

When there was conflict... When Korah challenged his leadership, o dear... Moses was not for silent disposal of opposition like some world leaders, poisoning their opposition leaders, Moses liked the big show, the clear cut between in and out.

The ground opened under Korah and his whole family and all the servants and animals were swallowed by the earth.

Unity by force. If you start feeling discomfort and wondering whether this is a Queen's Speech outlining the guidelines for the Church government in the time to come, please relax.

In today's Gospel, Jesus addresses the issue of unity among God's children. Very uncommon for him, he gives a detailed procedure how to handle conflict in the assembly. He is not talking about disagreement, but real painful and destructive conflict.

He wants someone to talk to an offender alone, if that does not bear fruits, take others and try everything possible. If nothing helps "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Mt 18:17c).

Tough one. But if we look closer, we realise how very different it is from the leadership style of Moses. When conflict arises, Jesus does not allow yelling, humiliating or gossiping, nor letting the noise makers be swallowed by the earth.

For Jesus, the Church, the children of God, are one body and like for a body, it needs every individual part. Today's Gospel passage follows the word of Jesus about the lost sheep and the shepherd who keeps looking for the one lost sheep until they find it. The assembly of believers is for Jesus a place of mutual interdependence.

We need each other. This boat cannot stay afloat, not to mention move, if we are not all on board.

If you weren't here today taking the effort to follow all the new guidelines, and if you at home wouldn't join us online, praying with and for us and singing to the Glory of God from your sofa or if people wouldn't take responsibility in these times and organise safe small group gatherings, rotas, flowers, the newsletter, music, Bible studies and so on – if just one of the many was lost, the whole body would suffer.

That's why it is of the highest importance for Jesus not to pretend there was no conflict and to sweep it under the rug, but to do everything to make reconciliation possible. The offended and the offender are all part of the one Body of Christ who unites us when we are gathered together, when we are watching from home or when we are isolated in silence listening for a sign of God's presence. The blood from the sacrificed lamb on the door posts united the Israelites in their isolation, and the Blood of the Lamb who sacrificed himself, unites us as Christians.

The Israelites were united in the moment of the greatest threat but they fell apart as soon as they found themselves in the wilderness and no one of them entered the Holy Land; only their children. Jesus wants us to learn from that and to take care that no one gets lost, also when the wilderness closes in on us. This journey needs everyone of us and we only enter the Holy Land, if we manage to bring everyone through the desert safely.

And if someone really does not want to join, as the toughest measure, "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Mt 18:17c). With whom did Jesus enjoy dinners and went for regular visits?

Let's set out for this journey, find a way out of the wilderness together and support each other on our way to the Promised Land.