

MATERIAL FOR HOLY WEEK 2020

Wednesday – Luke 22.24-38

Today we read of the arguments at the Last Supper, the Passover Meal. It can't have been an easy atmosphere. George Herbert's poem "The Bunch of Grapes" reflects a difficult journey.

Joy, I did lock thee up: but some bad man
 Hath let thee out again:
And now, methinks, I am where I began
 Sev'n years ago: one vogue and vein,
 One air of thoughts usurps my brain.
I did towards Canaan draw; but now I am
Brought back to the Red Sea, the sea of shame.

For as the Jews of old by God's command
 Travell'd, and saw no town,
So now each Christian hath his journeys span'd:
 Their story pens and sets us down.
 A single deed is small renown.
God's works are wide, and let in future times;
His ancient justice overflows our crimes.

Then have we too our guardian fires and clouds;
 Our Scripture-dew drops fast:
We have our sands and serpents, tents and shrouds;
 Alas! our murmurings come not last.
 But where's the cluster? Where's the taste
Of mine inheritance? Lord, if I must borrow,
Let me as well take up their joy, as sorrow.

But can he want the grape, who hath the wine?
 I have their fruit and more.
Blessed be God, who prosper'd Noah's vine,
 And made it bring forth grapes' good store.
 But much more him I must adore,
Who of the Law's sour juice sweet wine did make,
Ev'n God himself being pressed for my sake.

The poem has its roots in our Old Testament, in the history of the Jewish people. In Numbers chapter 13, the children of Israel have reached Canaan, reached the Promised Land, and Moses sends spies to see what the land is like. "So they went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, near Lebohamat. ... They came to the Wadi Eshcol, and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them." That is quite a bunch of grapes, this land is going to be worth entering. Unfortunately they also bought back reports of giants. The children of Israel took fright, refused to enter, and God sent them back to wander for seven more years. "Brought back to the Red Sea, the sea of shame."

Herbert takes the Jewish journey, its positives and its negatives, its to and fro, and relates those journeys to the journeys of ordinary Christian men and women. "I did towards Canaan draw, but now I am brought back" - this is not just ancient history. Like the Jews who, in the wilderness, had their "sands and serpents, tents and shrouds" - so do we. When we have joy, when life is good - suddenly you find that some bad man has let the joy out, and it is so easy to wonder if you have progressed, or are you still where you were seven years ago?

We have more than a bunch of grapes, we have wine - there is a Eucharistic reference. Genesis 9 verse 20 tells us that Noah was the first to plant a vineyard, and the first to get drunk from his wine. I had forgotten that Noah had more than an ark to his name. Wine, "grapes' good store", is a gift of God, but we adore God more than wine.

On the cross God in Christ will drink the sour juice, the vinegar he is given by a soldier - and through his death the Law will be fulfilled. God himself is being pressed for my sake - just as grapes are crushed to make wine, Christ is killed for our redemption.

George Herbert wrote this poem for a man called Arthur Woodnoth. He was a businessman, a successful goldsmith. There are records of his visits to Little Gidding and to Bemerton, of his struggling as he sought to decide whether he was called to ordination, of the questions he asked Herbert, and the advice he received. I'm told that the bunch of grapes was the sign over his goldsmith's business in Foster Lane, London. To a man struggling to find his vocation, trying to make sense of his life, here is a poem that says, life is confusing, life is to and fro, life is not clear - but God was with his people the Jews, and God fulfils his promises. That resonates with us this year.

This poem hasn't been set to music, so I've found a poem by Thomas Campion, a contemporary of Herbert's. It challenges us about our sin – and assures us of God's grace and forgiveness.

View me, Lord, a work of thine:
Shall I then lie drown'd in night?
Might thy grace in me but shine,
I should seem made all of light.

Cleanse me, Lord, that I may kneel
At thine altar, pure and white;
They that once thy mercies feel,
Gaze no more on earth's delight.

Worldly joys, like shadows, fade
When the heav'nly light appears;
But the cov'nants thou hast made,
Endless, know nor days, nor years.

In thy word, Lord, is my trust,
To thy mercies fast I fly;
Though I am but clay and dust,
Yet thy grace can lift me high.

Words: Thomas Campion, 1567-1620
Music: Richard H. Lloyd, born 1933

Boys' and Girls' Choir of Salisbury Cathedral, directed by Simon Lole
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ov4-XMJgqL8>