

There is something really different about tonight. We only do church on a Thursday evening twice a year, unless December 24<sup>th</sup> falls on Thursday. The festival we celebrate tonight is not attached to a calendar date. This festival is determined by the very position of the planet and the moon in space, and this is the night that changes everything.

All around the world tonight, Jewish families will be keeping the rituals of the Passover.

- They will remember the long dark night when the Hebrew people daubed blood on their doorposts and were spared while the unprotected houses lost their firstborn child.
- This was the night before Moses led them out of slavery and into freedom.
- They will eat a special meal with unusual foods to remind them of that night.
- They will read and follow the instructions given in the scriptures.
- They will celebrate the memory of the night that changed everything.

And all around the world tonight, Christians will be keeping the rituals of one specific Passover - the last one that Jesus spent on earth.

- We too remember the long dark night when the Hebrew people daubed blood on their doorposts and were spared while all the unprotected houses lost their firstborn child.
- We too remember the night before Moses led them out of slavery and into freedom.
- We too read the instructions given in the scriptures for celebrating the Passover.

But for us there's more....

- We also remember how Jesus spent his last Passover:
- ...how he washed the feet of his friends;
- ...how he shared bread and wine with them;
- ...how he tried to prepare them for what the long night and the next day and the future were to bring.

This is the night that changed everything.

The human mind has always feared the long, dark night, full of "perils and dangers." In our times, electricity has taken away much of the literal darkness, but the metaphysical dark of the night is still there. And this is the suspended moment before the evil of the night is let loose and the inevitable sequence of events unfolds. You can almost feel the whole world holding its breath, waiting in dread.

We all face long nights of dread at some times in our lives:

- nights when we fear what may happen before morning;
- nights when we fear what we know will happen in the morning.

- \* There are long dark nights when we wait for the death of someone we love.
- \* There are long dark nights before we face serious surgery;
  - nights before some personal trial;
  - nights when we deal with sudden illness or accident;
  - nights when we fear violence.

And tonight, as we gather to remember this particular night of universal significance, there are people out there in the night, both near and far, who are facing long nights of dread....

- are people sitting in fear of death;
- people huddling in fear of violence;
- people afraid for the life of someone they love;
- people aching in their loneliness;
- people who fear that the night and its perils will never end;
- people who fear that the morning and its perils will come only too soon.

And near and far there are people who have no idea yet that they will be facing terrors and trials this night and tomorrow.

For some people this will be the night that changes everything in their own lives. And for all of us who call ourselves Christians, this is the long dark night that changed everything for the whole world, for ever.

What was happening that long ago night in Jerusalem? The disciples and Jesus sat together at a Seder meal, like every other Jewish household in the city. Tonight they felt safe, gathered in their private room, with the doors closed against danger. Theirs had been a long journey, travelling and teaching, but now they were in Jerusalem for the big holy festival. They shared bread and wine together – maybe they drank just a little too much wine – enough to make them a little sleepy - too sleepy to stay awake while Jesus prayed.

They had no idea what would happen later this night and the next, terrible day. They were mystified when Jesus washed their feet. They were puzzled when he said strange things over the bread and wine. They were horrified when he said one of them would betray him. They didn't know yet that everything was about to change.

Except Judas. He knew. What were his thoughts tonight? How could he sit through this supper as if he was still one of the group of devoted friends? How could he let Jesus wash his feet, how could he accept such a gesture of love and then go out and betray him?

In another part of the same dark city, the priests and elders of the temple were sitting in fear tonight: – fear of losing their privileged positions; – fear of provoking a confrontation with Rome; – fear that a teacher from Galilee would start a war they couldn't win. Later tonight they would give in to evil, convinced that false witnesses, trumped-up charges, and execution of the innocent, were all necessary.

And in yet another part of the city, the Romans were sitting in fear too. The Roman grip was not strong in this province; it was not a good posting for a governor. Pilate was worried tonight. He was already in trouble with the emperor for not keeping this troublesome place quiet. He couldn't afford another incident, but tonight the city was volatile, potentially explosive. Pilate's night was full of fear too, and before daylight he, too, would convince himself that the evil ahead of him was all necessary.

All of them - the Jews, the Romans, the disciples of Christ – were afraid of what tomorrow would bring. How would they all get through this night? How do we all get through our long nights of fear? We get through them with courage, with help from others, and with faith. And we get through those nights with prayer, and with the grace of God.

That grace may touch us in the loving touch of a relative or friend or spouse who sits up all night and listens.

- Or it might be a police officer, or a nurse, or a doctor, who offers comfort.
- Or a stranger who stops to help.
- Or a comforting voice on the telephone.

And all of them would be living out the great mandate we are all given tonight - to love and serve one another.

We get through the long nights of fear and tragedy the way Jesus did: by putting ourselves into the hands of God. There is always a moment when we really believe, and fervently pray, that everything we dread could be averted – that the cup we fear could be taken away; that there will be a miraculous recovery or reversal; that the trial, the loss, the pain, the betrayal won't happen.

This night will end, and events will roll on, and in a few days joy will return. But there is a lot to learn tonight, a lot to think about. Don't rush away from it too quickly.

Stay awhile in this suspended moment.....

- stay with Pilate who soon will fail to stand against malevolence...
- stay with the religious leaders who soon will unleash barbarous cruelty in the name of God...
- stay with Judas who soon will lose himself completely to the darkness...

- stay with Peter who soon will despair at his own lack of courage...
- stay with Jesus while he puts himself in God's hands.

Stay awhile to ponder the long dark night that changed everything for the whole world, for ever.

Stay awhile with Jesus while he prays.