

Passover Homily

There are times...days, weeks, even, that praise and gratitude come naturally. Days like today, with its warm sun and greening world, the energy of the crowd, the excitement of the children, and the promise of a little chocolate on the counter at home.... Hallelujah!

There are other days...days when the ugliness of politics, (it has been pretty shocking lately, hasn't it?) the dangers that lurk in the world, our worries for our future and our children's futures, hang close and cloud our gratitude. How do you sing your hallelujah's when things are not going well?

We can take a clue from the Jewish tradition of Passover, an ancient holiday with pagan roots that reached its most developed form in the Jewish ghettos of Europe, shaped by a people who faced monstrous discrimination, limited options for themselves and their children, and danger...especially danger during Easter Week, when peasants, enflamed by anti-Semitic Holy Week sermons blaming Jews for the execution of Jesus, all too often went on a murderous rampage. Passover comes each year during the Lunar Spring, many years at the same time as the Christian Holy Week.

Instead of cowering, Jews celebrated their holiday, gathered together and re-told the story of the exodus from slavery in Egypt at the dinner table. The feast included symbolic foods; horseradish, reminiscent of the bitterness of slavery, matzo, the poor bread; unleavened because of the need for haste in their escape, the sweet wine of freedom. Then, at the end of the meal, (which is when Jews say grace,) the leader reads: "Halleluiah. We praise...Our song is one with all the

hymns which sing of the triumph of humanity over the powers of destruction.”

And the assembled group responds:

(these songs) will be one with the praise songs of all peoples;

Praise for the earth restored to its goodness:

Praise, for persons, restored to themselves

Praise, for life fulfilled in sacred celebrations! Hallelujah!

The Jews of the European ghettos were better off for this praise, for taking a break from their suffering with family and neighbors, putting their kopeks together for a celebratory meal, singing and reciting together, reminding themselves of their history, their values, and the fact that things had been better once upon a time, and voicing their hope that it wouldn't always be the way it is now. “Next year in Jerusalem,” the seder ends. “ Next year, in *Jeru-Salam*, the city of peace. Next year, may we all be free.”

Gratitude and Praise are good for us. They send happy-making chemicals coursing through our brains, keep us aware of what is good in our lives, and keep us in right relationship with a universe we did not create ourselves and with the gift of life.

Gratitude is one of those human qualities, like hope, and love, which are emotional in nature, and, therefore, not completely under our control, but which the world's faiths tell us should be spiritual practices, things we work at...even when we don't feel like it. “Gratitude makes the Soul great,” said Rabbi Abraham Heschel. “If the only prayer you ever say in your life is Thank you, then that is enough,” said the Christian Mystic, Meister Eckhart. “Gratitude is not only a

virtue, it is the parent of all virtues,” declared the Roman philosopher Cicero. Muhammad said that the ones who will be summoned to paradise first are those who praised god in all circumstances, and the essence of those five-times daily prayers which Muslims say are not requests and petitions, but gratitude and praise. Hallelujah!

And so it may be that the frost got the apricots, that this year’s political campaign is testing the limits of democracy and decency, that the warm early March was downright alarming, that We are Brussels and We are Nigeria and we are more than a little worried about our world.... and it is still true that our lives are gifts, the world is beautiful, and we are better together, that there is work for us to do. Halleljuah.