Sunday January 6, 1974

COMMENT ON THE SCRIPTURE READINGS IN PREPARATION FOR HOLY COMMUNION - Matthew 2:13-16, Luke 22:14-27

These two scripture passages indicate that some disturbing events occurred right after the first Christmas and also at the time of the last supper of Jesus Christ with his disciples which took place the night before his death.

We have just finished again with the celebration of Christmas. Today, January 6, is known as Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas, and commemorates the visit of the Wise Men to the birthplace of Jesus. We are told in the Bible that Herod the King was particularly anxious for the Three Wise Men to report back to him all they could find out about the new baby who was rumored to be a new king. Then when the wise men did not report back to him, Herod ordered all the male children in Bethlehem and in that region who were two years old or under, killed, hopin in that way to kill the infant Jesus.

So we have the paradox that the birth stories of Jesus which announce a joyful event, also report widespread suffering of the innocent because of that birth. The birth of the Saviour who stands for God's love of the world and the human beings in the world, at the same time brings opposition and death. Christmas is celebrated, but the world soon, all too soon, returns to its old ways.

The same is true of that first Last Supper. Jesus had hoped to have a quiet supper with his disciples. He was certain that it would be his last time with them as a group and he was also looking for support and strength as he prepared for what was to happen.

Yet it couldn't be that way. During the supper in the conversation, Jesus noted that one of the 12 would betray him. And then right after the supper was finished, the disciples got into an argument among themselves as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.

And then after they had left the room to go with Jesus to the garden to pray, some of the disciples fell asleep while Jesus was in his deepest agony.

And all the while a conspiracy was brewing and coming to a head. Judas led a band of soldiers to arrest Jesus. Then

came the denial by Peter and the flight of the rest of the disciples. Just a few hours after the first communion meal, Jesus was in custody and all of the closest followers had deserted him.

Not much later an unruly mob gathered, full of hate and crying out for violent action against Jesus, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Again, just as at Jesus' birth, the world wants to be rid of him.

The point is as these scripture passages point out, the birth of Jesus, his message, his life, deal with the same kinds of issues we constantly face--joy and sorrow, sickness and health, support and opposition.

The point is also that Jesus was too much for his own contemporaries. He was arrested and executed and that was that. And so he was buried and that sh ould have been the end of that. An itinererant Galilean rabbi, with a ragtag band of followers, living in the midst of immense religious ferment on the fringes of the Roman Empire--hardly worth noticing. He ought to have been promptly forgotten.

But he wasn't and still isn't! He lives on! Jesus and his message would not stay dead! And his message was and is and love is at the core of the universe. At the same time that life seems to be absurd, capricious, random--and occasionally downright ugly and vindictive. We like many of Jesus' contemporaries are tempted to write it all off as senseless folly. And yet, we cannot quite eliminate our hope.

In effect Jesus said, hope your wildest hopes, dream your maddest dreams, imagine your most fantastic fantasies. Where your hopes and your dreams and your imagination leave off, the love of my heavenly Father only begins. "For eye has not seen nor has ear heard nor is it entered into the heart of human beings the things that God has prepared for those who love him."

So in spite of the problems we face this year of 1974, the Lord's Supper we are about to celebrate speaks to us of God's love, of God being with us in whatever we face and of God's ultimate victory on our behalf. Amen.