Holy Thursday

Today’s celebration begins with light. In the Duomo (the cathedral) of Milan, the mass begins with lighting candles and then electric lights. And the people sing: “O God, you are my light; My God, shine light on my darkness.”

We are not unaware of what is in store, of course. We know that dark times are coming soon. But for now, we celebrate the light that Jesus brings as he shares life with his disciples. They eat this meal of celebration together, and we bring to mind times we have shared with family – holiday meals, birthday parties, wedding banquets, family picnics. We celebrate; we eat and drink together; we are one in life.

Jesus gathers with his friends as they have done many times before. But as they begin, he sounds an ominous warning: “One of you will betray me.” “Who me?” they ask one by one in trepidation, “Who me?” And to the one he has to reply, “You’ve said it, yeah, Judas, it’s you.” Jesus and his truth have become too much for this one of them. He has sold out his friend.

Before the betrayal works itself out, though, they continue to celebrate. He takes the bread and blesses it, as is usual, but adds the mysterious description that “this is my body.” And at the end with the cup of blessing, “This is the cup of my blood.” They have no grasp of what he is saying, but we know the story. We know where this is going.

In the liturgy in Milan, after communion, the whole assembly of ministers, the musicians, the Knights of Malta or of the Holy Sepulcher along with their ladines march in glorious procession with candles and incense to an altar of repose, where the Mass is concluded and vespers is sung. It is triumph.

And then comes the dark. As Jesus left the lighted upper room and made his way through the dark streets to Gethsemane, the church lights go out. All color, all decoration, all cloth and liturgical setting is quickly retired. And in the darkness comes the Judas kiss, the binding of Jesus and dragging him off, the denial by his good friend Rocky, or Peter, “Who me? I don’t know him. Don’t ask me anything about him.” And we hear the cock crow.

In this darkness, the people leave the liturgy, exit the cathedral, make their way home. And we are left on our own. Who am I in this darkness? How do I defend Jesus, my Lord, or do I let him get carried off? Yes, I am powerless to change what is happening. But is there any way I fit in? If I can’t do anything right now to save Jesus, can I care for the least of his brothers and sisters? That would be caring for him he has told me. Or do I just go back to my old life, my real life for a while, wishing, wondering why and what might have been?

The darkness lasts. The gloom perdures through a bleak Good Friday and through the stillness of the Saturday beyond. Will we see light again? We trust so, but It will be a while.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Do I sense the darkness of ignorance, or of injustice, or of disease, or of broken relationships?

Can I enter into this darkness with Jesus, finding hope in him?

Can I see beyond the darkness to trust that there will be light?

When I sing “O God, you are my light; My God, shine light on my darkness” do I sing with full hope in my heart?