

Maundy Thursday – April 17, 2014
Exodus 12:1-14; I Corinthians 11:23-26, Psalm 116:1, 10-17; 78:14-15, 17-19, 23-25;
John 13:1-17, 31b-35
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Christ our Passover is Sacrificed for Us

Among various themes that come forth on this special evening of Maundy Thursday, we commemorate and celebrate the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples. As we do every Sunday we'll hear in our liturgy tonight the quote from St. Paul, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." That one phrase summarizes very well what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper, and, then, what he accomplished through his suffering and death the following day.

And it was no ordinary supper. It was likely a Passover meal—one with powerful new implications. Passover is celebrated yearly in Jewish households recalling what God had done long ago for the Israelites in leading them out of slavery in Egypt and in protecting them from the final plague of the death of all the first-born children of Egypt.ⁱ Recall the long night of the Passover: an impenetrable darkness, death bearing down, an angel exterminating the first born of all the households of Egypt – that tenth and final plague recorded in the book of Exodus. It is the nightmare of nightmares in Holy Scripture. Yet the strangest mystery came out of that darkness. The sacrifice of a lamb and the shedding of its blood sprinkled on all the Jewish households protected the Israelites from that horrible event. The sacrifice of a lamb became the salvation of the Israelites. The death of the lamb became the life of the people. Out of this nightmare of darkness came the light of freedom for the people of Israel, as they fled from the Egyptians through the parting of the sea.

Passover was and remains also a festival of present or living remembrance. This is very meaningful for Jewish people—a people who have often been caught up in this movement from bondage to freedom, from degradation to deliverance. Jews are those whom God brought out of Egypt. They are those whom God brought out of Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman domination. They are those whom God brought out of the persecutions of the Middle Ages. They are those whom God has brought out of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. The past and present are drawn into each other in the Jewish Passover liturgy, and the future is given new vision from this perspective.

Jesus' Last Supper was such a Passover meal but with a twist. God's faithfulness and steadfast love for God's People as remembered in the Exodus were brought to mind, but also given remarkable new interpretations: Jesus brought his disciples up to date on what God was doing right then and there and over the next few days for *all* humanity.

First, Jesus positioned *himself* as the Passover sacrifice rather than a lamb. He took upon himself the fear and violence of distorted humanity through a body capable of suffering, in order to bear and to conquer that suffering. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Jesus became our Passover. Just as God passed over and saved the

Israelites from the angel of death in their exodus from Egypt, so also by Jesus' self-sacrificial life, death and resurrection, God passes over our failing, and falling and dying, and offers us new hope, new life. In and through Jesus the whole human race was put in an Exodus movement from bondage to freedom, from the certainty of death to the promise of life. And in the Spirit of the Risen Jesus, here and now, we are passed over all which keeps us from being authentically human, truly ourselves, so we may begin something quite new and hopeful.

The second reinterpretation of Jesus at the Last Supper was with regard to the bread and wine. Bread and wine symbolize, among other things, all the ways in which human beings live together – *and* tear each other to pieces. First, the Bread. Bread is seen at Passover as a bond of fellowship, yet also as the bread of affliction, baked hurriedly without leaven and eaten quickly by a people on the run. In the Passover Seder, the unleavened bread is eaten with bitter herbs which remind Jews of the bitterness of their bondage in Egypt, and in some interpretations, also remind them of the bitter tragedy which befell the Egyptians in the plagues. So, too, was this meal a bitter one for Jesus' disciples and is for us as well—because in the bread broken we see bitterly the nails which we all sharpened, our sleep which left Jesus alone in Gethsemane, our fear which denies our Lord. Bitterly, we see Judas whom we hired, Herod whom we obeyed, the High priest whom we believed. We see bitterly the thorns we gather, the lashes we inflict and the hands which we bloody. In the bread broken, bitterly we see idols closer to home that we worship and false securities on which we depend. This meal speaks of the full measure of our sin. And when we think of bread in this vein we also think of the domination, exploitation and pollution of humanity and nature that goes with the wider meaning of bread – the bread of affliction eaten by refugees on the run; the bread of anxious toil, the bitterness of modern competitive living and struggle especially of the have-nots; and all the organized selfishness and all the wicked oddity of a world distribution that brings plenty to some and malnutrition and starvation to others, bringing them to that symbol of poverty and desperation known as the breadline.

But Jesus also speaks of himself as this bread. And so we think of Jesus born in Bethlehem, the Hebrew word meaning “house of bread,” and of Jesus the “Bread of Life” broken for us. The bread blessed, broken and given out on the Last Supper reveals Jesus' love given and broken for all, including Judas. It speaks of his love which binds us all into one people. Therefore it speaks of the full measure of our forgiveness by God.

Next, the wine. Here again Jesus retains and expands its traditional meaning. At the original Passover the Israelites slaughtered the Passover (or paschal) lamb, and they anointed the doorposts and lintels of their houses with its blood, to keep out the angel of death as it “passed over” – thus allowing them to leave their homes safely and journey from slavery to freedom, from degradation to deliverance.ⁱⁱ But at this Last Supper, Jesus speaks of himself as the “true vine” *and* as the Passover or Paschal Lamb. He speaks of his love given and his life blood poured out for all. He proclaims a new covenant in His blood—Jesus as the restoration and reconciliation of all relationships. Therefore wine, too, speaks of the full measure of our forgiveness by God and the full

measure of who we may become in God's Spirit. And so, wine—fruit of the vine and work of human hands—is the wine of the presence of Christ our Passover whose blood was shed for us to bring us from enslavement to freedom, from degradation to deliverance.

Wine is also seen in the Passover liturgy as a symbol for God's unfailing promise of deliverance from all types of bondage and sin. As wine itself can become a slow and persistent plague and source of some of the most tragic forms of enslavement and degradation: in alcoholism, broken lives, broken homes—listen to one Passover liturgy as it ceremoniously pours out ten drops of wine for the plagues upon Egypt *and* for ten modern/equivalent plagues. It proclaims, "Each drop of wine we pour is hope and prayer that people will cast out the plagues that threaten everyone, everywhere they are found, beginning in our own hearts, namely: the making of war; the teaching of hate and violence; despoliation of the earth; perversion of justice and of government; fomenting of vice and crime; neglect of human needs; oppression of nations and peoples; corruption of culture; subjugation of science, learning and human discourse; and the erosion of freedoms"—the ten modern plagues. And so, wine—it is the wine of holidays such as Passover, the wine that loosens you up inside and so is such a good symbol of forgiveness – wine which is water and fire all in one. Wine speaks of a hope and again points to the full measure of our sin *and* of God's forgiveness.

Altogether then, as we place bread and wine on the altar we take Jesus' new understanding along with our attempts *and* failures to live together, and all that is beautiful *and* ugly – and offer it all to God to make sense of and to consecrate.ⁱⁱⁱ

"Why is this night different from all other nights?" – to borrow from the Passover ritual. Well, this is the evening that Christ gathered with his disciples in the upper room. This is the evening that Christ took a towel and washed the disciples' feet, giving us an example that we should do to others as he has done to us. This is the evening that Jesus gave us a new commandment to love one another as he loves us. This is the evening that Christ our God gave us this holy feast, that we who eat this bread and drink this cup may proclaim his holy offering of himself, and be partakers of his resurrected life and ongoing mission of repairing the world. This is the evening that Christ the Lamb of God gave himself into the hands of those who would slay him. This is the night we remember and celebrate Christ our Passover and the New Exodus for all humanity and all creation which he began—for us all in every part of the world and for all time.^{iv}

We are invited to this meal to give thanks for all that has been done for us, to share together in the challenge of life and in the love of Jesus, and to become agents and instruments of God's Passover purposes of justice and healing and wholeness. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast.

ⁱ This year our Maundy Thursday observance *and* the Jewish Festival of Passover coincide, as they did on that night before Jesus died, when he celebrated the Passover with his disciples. Traditionally the Passover meal was, and is, a domestic feast, a family ritual taking place in the home, presided over by the parents or guardians of the household. It was and is the consecration of the home in Judaism. On the

night before he died, Jesus gathered together the disciples to make a home for them, to accept them as his kin, to in-corporate them as members of his household.

ⁱⁱ All over the world people make a home by consecrating their doorposts; for the home is, in theory anyway, a place of safety; and the vulnerable points in its defenses are the doors. The doors are dangerous places where nasty things lurk to get you as you go in and come out – and so they must be protected. As we see or hear of doors of homes being smashed in, in Iraq, Syria, Gaza, South Sudan, Afghanistan – and in so many other places – we know how vulnerable the home is; and much closer to home, how real and equally tragic foreclosures, displacement and homelessness are. The home that Jesus gathered and consecrated that night before he died was a paradoxical household however; because, it embraced all that we usually try to shut out from the home, including fear, violence and death. It is some form of betrayal and/or death that ends every community and shakes the foundation of any household. Nonetheless, with a wide open door, as it were, Jesus modeled the way of radical welcome, washing the feet of his disciples and inviting all of them to partake in what we now call the Last Supper. With Judas present, and all the rest of the disciples who would forsake Jesus and flee within a few short hours, this Last Supper was the consecration of a household, a home that took within itself treachery, fear, violence, betrayal and death. No wonder the Church around the world and over the centuries has been, and still is the refuge of some pretty unsavory characters – present company excluded of course! It was so from the beginning. That is why it is the home in which we can all belong – see Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., “Our home encloses treachery and death” in *The Independent* newspaper (London, March 23, 1989).

ⁱⁱⁱ Maundy Thursday is the consecration of our household of faith – the Church – a robust home – a home in which and from which we join Christ our Passover in his ongoing mission of bringing all from different kinds of enslavement into freedom, from degradation to deliverance. But the household of faith - the Church – is a curious home, because it was not founded by shutting out all that could subvert it, such as our capacity to divide from one another thus breaking the bonds of our common humanity; and to put each other on the market as it were, or otherwise to abuse and even kill each other, as our church history is full of examples.

^{iv} And that means nearly the opposite of that which is promulgated every day by our omnipresent global market economy, in which everything is turned into a commodity. When the Europeans landed in America, they astonished the native peoples by offering to buy their land. How could you buy the soil and the water and the air? How could you buy the seasons and the animals, fertility and abundance? What an eccentric notion! But now, almost all of life has been put on sale. We have a labor *market* and have made ourselves into commodities. Many, some of whom work and live close by and are members of this household of All Saints, if they're not presently out of work, are otherwise impoverished though working one or more jobs – jobs which often demand their labor yet damn their spirits, thus robbing them of humanity and identity and dignity, and transforming them into no more than “work hands” – hands dis-membered from the social body, the common-wealth. Now even schools, prisons, and hospitals are being transformed into bottom-line businesses, so that, as an insurance executive recently stated, “How can we escape the logical conclusion of the market-place that for the elderly and the chronically sick, the most economical solution is death?” (quoted in Radcliffe, *Ibid.*).

But here tonight we remember that we are limbs and parts of a body that has died and lives forever – the living Jesus who was sold for thirty pieces of silver – made into a commodity; but, who instead made himself into a gift, freely offered – the opposite of a commodity – and formed a home for saints and sinners – the Church, the Body of Christ – of which he is still the head and we, who are many, are one body and individually, members one of another (Romans 12:5).

Our society would have us all be mass consumers or dis-membered commodities but tonight we wash one another's feet and eat of the bread of life and drink from the common cup of salvation, gathered here as a household in this our home, proclaiming with the prophet Isaiah, “For thus says the Lord: You were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money (52:3)...Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine (and milk) without money

and without price (55:1). Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy (55:2)." Or, to borrow from a well-known ad that gets at the paradox of this household of faith: Doing church at and from this crossroads in this great city? – \$100K a year. Being church together in small and great moments throughout the year, such as this evening? – Priceless. May God bless our home, and all homes, and make us ever more mindful of the needs of those who have no place to call their home.

That exodus, that Passover movement from bondage to freedom, from degradation to deliverance, was accomplished by Jesus in his life, death and resurrection, and continues through his struggle until the final day when he will come in full glory and God will be all in all

Additional Quotes: From the ancient Rule of St. Benedict:

"All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ."

Martin Luther King, Jr.:

"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. . . . Together we must learn to live as brothers [and sisters] or together we will be forced to perish as fools. . . . In a real sense, all life is interrelated. We are inevitably our brother's keeper because we are our brother's brother [and sister]. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." (Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail" April 16, 1963; and Martin Luther King, Jr., "The World House" in Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 171, 181).

Former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold:

"I am put in mind of the Archbishop's [of Canterbury] observation...that in Baptism we are bound together in *"solidarities not of our own choosing."* Communion is costly and difficult to live in the concrete, and it is impossible to do so without the love, which is the very life of the Trinity, being poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit." (Frank Griswold, "A Word to the Church" (New York: Episcopal News Service, July 11, 2006 - http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/3577_76638_ENG_HTM.htm)).