

Lent Lecture 2 – The Passover of the Lord

Welcome to the second of our lent lectures. Last week we explored who Jesus was and a little of the Old Testament backdrop to his coming. We came to recognise that we cannot fully understand who Jesus is and what he does without first understanding his Jewish ancestry.

This week we are going to direct our investigation a little more precisely. The events of the last three days of Holy Week; that's Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday (called the Sacred Triduum) are pivotal to Christian faith. In fact, observing these days in an appropriately devotional way is a must to anyone who is serious about their journey of faith. By the very nature of the events it venerates, the Sacred Triduum should be a bit of an emotional rollercoaster, with moments of confusion mingled expectation, sadness and grief, excitement and hope. And it all begins with the first evening of Maundy Thursday.

The most significant feature of the night before Christ died was of course the Last Supper. Now the events of Maundy Thursday are a little strange. So this evening we are going to look at some of this through fresh eyes.

We will start this investigation in what might appear to be a slightly strange place, not with Jesus at all, but with the Jewish expectation for a Messiah. Why? Because there are significant aspects to what the Jewish tradition expected of the Messiah that relate directly to what Jesus does at the Last Supper.

Remember the story of the Exodus in the Old Testament, when Moses led God's people out of Egypt into the promised land? Remember how God had instructed his people to celebrate the Passover meal that night, before the Exodus happened, and to smear their door lintels with blood as a sign that they had done so, so that the Angel of death could distinguish them from their oppressors, the Egyptians?¹ Well this story of the Exodus is not only extremely significant in the history of Israel but also Christianity.

As we explored briefly last week, at the time of Jesus, many in Israel expected God to send them a Messiah. And that the messiah's coming would be accompanied by signs.

Our investigation will now briefly look at each of the signs the prophets foretold concerning the Messiah and consider Christ in light of them. It should be noted that nothing under the sun is new, and much of this paper is indebted to the research of Brant Petre, Scott Hahn and Paul Bradshaw. Their books are referenced here.²

The New Moses

If we examine the Jewish tradition, we see that the Messiah is expected to be a new Moses whose actions parallel those of the first Moses.³ The new Moses would bring in a new covenant. And as Moses had gone out of Egypt using a donkey,⁴ so too the Messiah would come, humble and riding on a donkey.⁵ Not only that, but just as Moses had caused miraculous manna to descend from above to feed God's people in the wilderness, the rabbis were sure that one day the Messiah would rain down bread from heaven, but this bread would last for eternity.⁶

We will return to the huge significance of the 'bread from heaven' in a moment. For now, it is just worth noting how Jesus fulfils some of those other expectations connected with Moses. So, for example, Jesus begins his public ministry by fasting for forty days in the desert, just as Moses fasted for forty

¹ Exodus 12 (see note 1 on reference sheet)

² B. Petre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*; S. Hahn, *The Lamb's Supper*; P. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins*

³ Deuteronomy 18:15-18

⁴ Exodus 4:20

⁵ Zechariah 9:9

⁶ Psalm 72:16; witnesses to ancient Jewish tradition confirm this teaching; the Mishna, the Targums, the Talmud.

days in the wilderness on Mount Sinai.⁷ Jesus turns water into wine at the wedding feast, just as Moses turns water into blood as the first sign against Pharaoh leading up to the Exodus.⁸ But most obvious of all, Jesus rides into Jerusalem and is greeted as king whilst riding on a donkey (which we commemorate on Palm Sunday). This both emulates Moses riding a donkey and fulfils Zechariah's prophecy that the Messiah would come 'lowly and riding on an ass'.⁹ Most striking though, Jesus fulfils the expectation for a new covenant.

The New Covenant

When we look at the events of the Passover and the Exodus, we notice that the salvation of God's people from Egypt is marked by Him declaring with them a new covenant.¹⁰

This covenant is sealed in blood (because blood represents the life force). Moses sprinkles the blood over the people and throws it upon the Altar (the people represent Israel and the Altar represents God). In this way, God makes the people of Israel his own 'flesh and blood', and reaffirms them as his family. They now share the same blood.

But, as the prophet Jeremiah later discloses, the people of Israel had broken the covenant made at the time of the first Exodus because of their disordered and disobedient lives.¹¹ In Jeremiah's words, the connection between the exodus covenant and the new covenant is very clear. This new covenant will be greater than the covenant when God brought the Israelites out of Egypt. It would mark a time when faithfulness in God would become a mark on the hearts of his people.

Naturally, following the tradition of the new Moses, it soon developed in the rabbinic teaching that the new covenant would also be sealed in blood (just like the covenant on Mount Sinai when the Israelites were rescued from Egypt) and it would climax with a heavenly meal.

So how does Jesus fit this particular prophecy? Towards the end of his earthly ministry Jesus takes his twelve disciples (mirroring the twelve tribes of Israel) into the Upper Room on the night before he died and he takes a cup of wine and says "this cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood".¹² And in these words he is telling his followers that he is fulfilling the new covenant through his own death.

The Manna from Heaven

Now we return to the Manna, the 'bread from Heaven', because this is extremely important in reference to Jesus. In the Exodus story, when God's people are roaming the wilderness and they begin grumbling that they have nothing to eat, God sends down bread from heaven, which is called Manna. He sends them this bread every morning and then gives them flesh in the form of quails each evening. This continues for the whole time they are in the wilderness- a full 40 years. The Manna has a delicious taste, quite unlike anything they have ever come across and unable to be described. It is heavenly. The Manna is nothing less than a miracle. It is literally 'bread from the Angels'.¹³ Now some modern sceptics have claimed that this was actually some kind of plant life that only appeared in the morning – that seems rather farcical, especially given that it appeared for forty years in whatever location they found themselves, and then stopped once they reached the promised land.

⁷ Exodus 34:28; Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13

⁸ Exodus 4:14-24; Zechariah 9:9; John 2:1-11

⁹ Exodus 4:20; Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:29-38; John 12:12-18

¹⁰ Exodus 24:5-14 (see note 2 on reference sheet)

¹¹ Jeremiah 31:31-33 (see note 3 on reference sheet)

¹² Luke 22:20; Corinthians 11:25

¹³ Psalm 78:25

But the miracle of the Manna was not just a miracle of bread quite unlike anything they had ever tasted. It was also a miracle of flesh, since in the evenings God provided quails, swarms of them.¹⁴ This was then, quite literally bread and flesh from heaven.

God commanded that any bread that was not consumed was to be stored in the Tabernacle of Moses. This was as a reminder to God's people that the bread was not only miraculous, but also holy – it was God's heavenly gift to them, reminding them also that he was always with them, guiding and protecting them. In this way, we see that this 'bread from heaven' is supernatural, that is, it sustained both body and soul. (This is the same reason we reserve the bread of the Eucharist in our tabernacle today).

Enriching this understanding further, the Jewish tradition believed that the Manna given to the Israelites in the wilderness was a miracle from the beginning of creation; one of the 'ten things' that were 'created on the eve' of the seventh day.¹⁵

One doesn't have to be a deep biblical scholar to instantly recognise how all of this relates to Jesus and his actions at the Last Supper. But even before that fated last night, Jesus was relating himself to this particular piece of the prophetic message regarding the Messiah.

Most significantly, if we look at chapter 6 of John's Gospel, we get a huge insight.¹⁶ Most informatively the response of his followers place his words in context and their reactions also provide us with the key to what Jesus' true intentions were. Chapter 6 of John's Gospel starts with the feeding of the five thousand.¹⁷ There is clearly more than a suggestion being drawn here between Moses feeding God's people with 'bread from heaven' in the wilderness and Jesus performing a miracle in which a few loaves become enough to feed five thousand people in a deserted place.

But it is what happens next that is most striking. The people begin connecting Him to the Messiah and demand another sign, this time they ask Him to bring down Manna from Heaven.¹⁸ At this point Jesus launches into some of the richest teaching we have about who He is and the mystery of the Eucharist. First He refers to the Manna in order to reveal his heavenly origin and the importance of believing in him.¹⁹ Then He emphasises the importance of eating his flesh; 'and the bread which I give for the life of the world is my flesh... He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life... for my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink'... 'This is the bread that comes down from heaven, not such as the Fathers ate and died; whoever eats this bread will live forever'.²⁰ In these passages Jesus intentionally relates the Jewish hope for new bread from heaven, the Manna of the Messiah, with what will happen at the Last Supper.

If we want to know whether Jesus meant this literally, examine the reactions of his followers. We are told: 'after this many of his disciples drew back and no longer walked with him'.²¹ What we see here is that those who were listening took offense at his words and left his company. But even more significantly, Jesus let them go. His words sounded so astonishing that they couldn't bear it and many simply refused to believe Him.

It is important to realise what is going on here though. The problem isn't that they have misunderstood him by taking him too literally – this had happened before and he had always taken time to explain it to them so that they understood.²² In this teaching about His body and blood, he does not explain anything further, instead he just lets huge numbers of the followers leave. It was not that they had didn't understand him, it was that that they refused to believe him.

¹⁴ Exodus 16

¹⁵ Mishnah Aboth 5:6; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Exodus 16:4

¹⁶ John 6:35-58

¹⁷ John 6:1-15

¹⁸ John 6:30-34 (see note 6 on reference sheet)

¹⁹ John 35-47

²⁰ John 6:48-59 (see note 6 on reference sheet)

²¹ John 6:60-69 (see note 6 on reference sheet)

²² e.g. Matthew 16:5-12

This teaching about needing to eat his body and blood was understandably a real challenge and it called for supernatural faith. For many that was too much. Only the twelve remained. When Jesus asks them whether they will also leave him, Simon Peter answers; 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'²³ Peter is saying, 'even though I don't fully comprehend what you mean, I know who you are. I have faith!'

All of this comes is brought together more simply, of course, in Jesus' words at the Last Supper; 'This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me!'²⁴ Just like the Manna, the bread of the Last Supper is transformed into a supernatural substance that becomes Christ's body for his believers. By eating this supernatural bread, the life giving supernatural essence of Christ becomes a part of his believers.

But let us not forget the expectation that the Messiah would bring the bread of heaven and this time it would last for eternity. This offers us a fresh insight into more than just the Last Supper. It completely transforms the Lord's Prayer. When Jesus tells his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer and in it ask God to 'give us each day our daily bread', Christ is not only speaking of physical nourishment, to my mind, he is clearly referring to the eternal 'bread from heaven', the bread of the Eucharist, 'our daily bread'. This, in the end, will be the only bread that will replenish our souls and place God in our hearts.

The Four Cups.

There is so much more that we could talk about in reference to all of this. At this juncture, however, I feel it would be most helpful for us to think more precisely about the Last Supper proper.

The first thing to note is that the Last Supper seems to be a Passover. Jesus' disciples certainly thought that was. Indeed, Jesus himself identifies it as a Passover feast. He says; 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer'.²⁵ So the Last Supper is a Passover meal celebrating Israel's freedom from Egypt. The rules for the Passover had been strictly laid down as an annual ritual to be followed on the same day each year to remind God's people of His miraculous act.

Jesus and his disciples would have celebrated the Passover many times in Jerusalem. Jesus will have known what he was doing. But what he does on this final night is slightly odd. We have already seen how he refers to the bread and wine as his body and blood. But so much more is going on here. For instance, Jesus clearly associates himself with the Passover lamb and in our next lecture about Good Friday, we will explore this in more depth.

Fr now, it is important for us just to note that, in the tradition of the Passover, each lamb had to be slaughtered in the Temple in a precise way by the temple priests before each family could take the sacrifice home to share it around the table with their families. The sacrificial lamb had to be eaten and consumed completely in order for the sacrifice to be complete.

Christ at the Last Supper places himself not only in the place of the sacrificial lamb, but also in the place of the priest. He offers himself as the willing lamb, just as the temple priests would offer unwilling lambs for sacrifice. But Christ also intentionally associates his priesthood with a much more ancient form than that of the priests of the temple (who were the descendants of Aeron and Levi). Through his actions, Christ mirrors Melchizedek who had been the first priest king to offer sacrifice of bread and wine for Abram in the Old Testament, long before the Exodus.²⁶ As Hebrews confirms; 'he is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek'.²⁷ This is one reason why, to this day, only those set aside by God as priests may celebrate the Eucharist.

But there is one more mystery associated with the Last Supper that we now need to spend more time on. The Jewish Passover included the ritual drinking of four cups of wine, which would be drunk at

²³ John 6:68-69

²⁴ Luke 22:19. See other derivatives of the same in Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; I Corinthians 11:24

²⁵ Luke 22:15

²⁶ Genesis 14:18-20

²⁷ Hebrews 7:17

precise moments of the Passover liturgy. By the time of Jesus, this had become an essential custom of the Passover. Without them, any Jew would have considered the Passover inauthentic. So we need to ask, does Christ include this custom at the Last Supper?

In order to figure this out, we need to first understand what these four cups were in the Passover liturgy.

The First Cup: Introductory Rites & the Cup of Sanctification

As the family reclined around the table, the introductory rites would begin. Wine would be mixed with a little water. This was the first cup, known as the Cup of Sanctification. After it was mixed, the father of the gathering began the meal by saying a formal blessing over the cup and the feast. A small preliminary course of bitter herbs (representing the bitterness of life in Egypt) dipped in sauce would be eaten. The first cup would then be drunk.

The second Cup: The Cup of Proclamation and the reading of Scripture

Then the second cup of wine would be mixed. This was known as the Cup of Proclamation. They would look back to how God had redeemed Israel. The father would begin to proclaim what the Lord had done for Israel when he set them free from Egypt in the exodus. This took the form of an answer question format between the father and a son. The son would ask specific questions and the father would answer them using specific scriptures. The father would also explain the importance of parts of the Passover meal, such as the Lamb, the bread, the bitter herbs (and what they symbolized).

This act of explaining was arguably the heart of the meal. It helped keep the Passover as a day of remembrance according to God's command. It was central to the liturgy. No matter how many centuries had passed this enabled every Jew to share in the redemption won at the exodus.

Then by way of thanksgiving, psalm 113 and 114 would be sung and the second cup would be drunk

The Third Cup: The Cup of Blessing & Eating the Meal

Now the third cup of wine would be mixed. Blessings would be said over the unleavened bread. The standard Jewish blessing went something like this: 'blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, who brings forth bread from the earth'.

The feasting would begin by each person dipping a small morsel of bread dipped in sauce. (This may have been the morsel that Judas dipped into the dish before leaving the Last Supper to betray Jesus²⁸). Then the main meal would begin with the eating of the entire Passover lamb and unleavened bread. The cup of blessing was drunk and this stage of the meal complete.

The Fourth Cup: The Cup of Praise & The Concluding Rites

Then the fourth cup would be mixed, the Cup of Praise. This final part of the liturgy is more concise. Psalms of thanksgiving and praise would be sung; psalms 115-118.²⁹ As we have seen over and over again, when the Gospel accounts are held alongside what we know of the Jewish tradition, they suddenly spring to life with new meaning. In this case, psalms 115-118 are almost a script written for the servant God who would offer himself up as a "sacrifice of thanksgiving".³⁰ After the final psalm was sung and the fourth cup was drunk.³¹ With this the Passover ended; it was finished!

Jesus and the Fourth Cup

²⁸ John 13:26

²⁹ These are included for you at note 7 on your reference sheets

³⁰ Psalm 116:17

³¹ Psalm 118

If someone were to ask you before today if Jesus finished the Last Supper on the night before he died, I imagine you would have said yes. However, given what we now know about the Passover liturgy, one would have to reconsider. Here is why.

In Luke's Gospel depiction of the Last Supper Christ clearly offers the disciples two separate cups of wine. It says; 'And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said. "Take this, and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes. And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after supper, saying "This cup which is poured out for you is the covenant in my blood".'³²

Luke clearly identifies the second of these cups as the 'cup after supper'. According to the Passover liturgical tradition, the third cup, the Cup of Blessing was drunk after the meal was eaten. We can reasonably assume then, that Luke is referring to the third cup here, the Cup of Blessing. So what of the fourth cup. Without the Cup of Praise the Passover was not complete. Yet nowhere do we have any mention of this fourth cup having been consumed.

We are told in Mark 14:24-26 that they sang a hymn before departing but not that they drank the fourth cup. Now it is true that each of the Gospel writers includes slightly different details of what happened according to what they feel is most important for their audience. But the fourth cup was essential to the ritual completing of the sacrifice and for this reason it seems remarkable that all four Gospel writers would leave it out.

So we have to take it that the fourth cup was not drunk. For the disciples, this would have been bizarre to say the least. They sing the hymn and would have expected to drink the final cup, and yet Jesus leads them instead into the Garden to pray.

Jesus' words in the middle for the meal give us a clue to what is going on. 'I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes', he says. All three of the Gospels that detail the Last Supper ritual include Jesus saying these or similar words. They all consider these words to be important enough to include in their Gospel accounts of Jesus. Why?

Then there are the repeated times that Jesus prays for the cup to be taken away from him in the garden of Gethsemane; 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; never the less, not as I will, but as you will'.³³ This seems a very odd metaphor to be using if he were asking for his time of suffering and death to be avoided.

The answer is, I think, to be found on the cross. Both Matthew and Mark tell us that bystanders 'took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink.'³⁴ But it is John who gives us the most detailed description and unlocks the mystery of the fourth cup for us. John tells us; 'After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfil the scripture), "I thirst". A bowl of sour wine stood there; so they put a sponge full of the wine on hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "it is finished"; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.'³⁵

Notice what has just happened. Jesus does not say "it is finished" until after he has received the wine; he is not referring to his life or his messianic mission. This seems to refer back to his statements at the Last Supper, that he will not drink of it again until the Kingdom of God comes, and asking for the cup to be removed from him in the garden of Gethsemane. This means that Jesus did indeed drink the fourth cup of the sacrifice of the Passover Meal, the Cup of Praise. But he did not do it in the Upper Room, he did it on the cross. He did it at the very moment of his death. His death seals the sacrifice, completes the Passover.

³² Luke 22:14-20

³³ Matthew 26:36-46

³⁴ Matthew 26:46; Mark 14:36

³⁵ John 16:23-30

The sacrifice is finished, completed. This is the new sacrifice of the new exodus, in which Christ is the priest who willingly offers himself as the sacrificial lamb. He is the father at table explaining to his followers the meaning of the new Passover liturgy through which God's people will be set free from their sins and released into a new promised land to be found in faith and hope. A land flowing with milk and honey where the bread from heaven will be given continuously to God's people as their spiritual sustenance. This is why they pray; 'give us today our daily bread'.

In the Eucharist (which is Greek for Thanksgiving) we follow Jesus' words to do this as often as we drink it in remembrance of him. Every time we partake, we share the Cup of Thanksgiving and eat of the heavenly manner, the bread of the angels, a foretaste of the eternal banquet of bread and wine that we will feast on in heaven. This is why we do what we do and we do it often.