

JESUS AND THE LAST SUPPER

Mark 14:12-26

Jesus is preparing to eat the Passover with his disciples. It's the last meal he will share with them before he goes to the cross on that Good Friday morning nearly two thousand years ago – that's why we call it the Last Supper. Tonight we're going to look at what Mark's gospel has to tell us about the Last Supper, so please open your Bibles at page 1020 so that you can follow it along with me.

Mark starts with a time reference – look at verse 12:

“On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"” (Mark 14:12 NIV)

Now, normally the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread would begin on the 15th day of the month of Nisan following the celebration of the Passover the previous evening – that is the Feast would begin on Good Friday. But, there is some evidence in the rabbinical literature, that the day on which the Passover lambs were sacrificed (the 14th of Nisan) was sometimes loosely called “the first day of Unleavened Bread.” Also there are issues in the timing of the events surrounding Christ's passion. I've talked about these in quite a lot of detail in my Teaching Days – and this evening I'm just going to say that I am certain that the Last Supper was a Passover meal, although Christ's passion may well have taken place at the time of sacrifice of the Passover lambs in the Temple – paradoxical as that may seem.

Now the Passover had to be eaten inside the city of Jerusalem itself, so Jesus sends his disciples into the city to prepare – look at verses 13-16:

“So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for

us there." The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover." (Mark 14:13-16 NIV)

Jesus was clearly going to be the presiding head, the family head, over this Passover celebration. The reference to a man carrying a water jar suggests a pre-arranged signal, because normally carrying a water jar was the work of a woman or a slave. Certainly this would have made it easy for the disciples to identify the man. Also, unless Jesus had pre-arranged matters, it's very unlikely that a large room would have been available during the Passover, when Jerusalem was overcrowded with pilgrims – although it was normal for Jerusalem residents to rent out rooms to pilgrims at major festivals. The room was apparently "equipped" with either carpets or couches for Jesus and the disciples to recline on, as the Passover meal was always eaten in a reclining posture. The owner of the house had probably also arranged for the lamb to be sacrificed and secured the other provisions for the meal. The disciple's preparation would include the setting out of the unleavened bread and the wine, the preparation of the bitter herbs and sauce consisting of dried fruit, spices and wine, and presumably the roasting of the Passover lamb.

After Jesus has joined the disciples for the Passover, he announces his betrayal – look at verses 17:21:

"When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me." They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely not I?" "It is one of the Twelve," he replied, "one who dips bread into the bowl with me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." (Mark 14:17-21 NIV)

In those days the Jews usually ate the last meal of the day in the later afternoon. But, the Passover was different; it was always eaten in the evening. It began only after sunset; it could last until midnight, and had to be eaten within the walls of Jerusalem. So, Jesus returned to the city after sundown to share, with the twelve disciples, the Passover feast commemorating God's deliverance of his people from

bondage in Egypt. The celebration of the Passover was always marked by excitement and the high hope that it would be fulfilled by God's intervention once more. Exodus chapter 12 verse 42 tells us it was observed as "a night of watching unto the Lord" knowing that in that night they had been redeemed from slavery thousands of years before and in that night they would be redeemed in the future. Jesus came to the city fully aware that he was to accomplish the final Passover redemption in his own person.

At this point, let's just spend a moment looking at the conduct of the Passover celebration. The Passover meal was eaten within the framework of a liturgy whose core was the prayer of the family head and the recitation of the Hallel psalms – that's Psalms 113–118. When all participants had taken their places, the head of the house began the celebration by pronouncing a blessing, first of the festival and then of the wine (M. *Pesachim* X. 2). Then the company drank the first cup of wine. After this the food was brought in, consisting of unleavened bread, bitter herbs, greens, stewed fruit and roast lamb (M. *Pesachim* X. 3). The youngest son then asked why this night, with its special customs and food, was distinguished from all other nights (M. *Pesachim* X. 4). The family head responded by recalling the biblical account of the redemption from Egypt. This instruction led naturally into the praise of God for the salvation he had provided and the anticipation of future redemption: "So may the Lord, our God, and the God of our fathers, cause us to enjoy the feasts that come in peace, glad of heart at the upbuilding of your city and rejoicing in your service ... and we shall thank you with a new song for our redemption" (M. *Pesachim* X. 4–6).

The new song was the first part of the Hallel psalms, after which a second cup of wine was drunk. Then the head of the house took bread and pronounced over it the blessing of "the Lord our God, Sovereign of the world, who has caused bread to come forth out of the earth" (M. *Berachoth* VI. 1). He then broke the bread in pieces and handed it to those who were at the table, who ate it with the bitter herbs and stewed fruit. Only then did the meal really begin with the eating of the roasted lamb, and the meal had to be finished by midnight (M.

Pesachim X. 9). When the meal had been completed, the head of the family blessed the third cup of wine with a prayer of thanksgiving. There followed the singing of the second part of the Hallel (Ps. 116–118) and the drinking of the fourth cup of wine, which concluded the Passover (M. *Pesachim* X. 7).

But in the verses we read, the festivity and normal form of the meal was shattered when Jesus announced in verse 18 that one of those there in fellowship, one of his disciples, was going to betray him. Let's ask ourselves, do we eat with Jesus this night and yet betray him? In making this announcement Jesus was probably thinking of Psalm 41 where verse 9 speaks of betrayal by "one who has shared my bread" – which reminds us of verse 20 of our reading. A reference to Psalm 41 is especially appropriate as this Psalm goes on to speak of the ultimate triumph of the Psalmist over his enemies and a suitable repayment for the betrayer. Jesus' prophecy of his betrayal shows us not only his powers, but makes it completely clear that the passion and the cross were God's plan from the beginning.

Jesus then went on to institute the sacrament we still celebrate to this very day – the Eucharist – look at verses 22-25:

"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.'" (Mark 14:22-25 NIV)

As we heard a few moments ago, the blessing of God for the gift of bread took place just before the meal itself. The head of the family sat up from his reclining position, took a cake of unleavened bread, and recited the blessing over it in the name of all. Those present identified themselves with the blessing by saying "Amen." The family-head then broke for each person present a piece and gave it to him, the bread passing from hand to hand until it reached all the guests. The distribution normally took place in silence. Contrary to Passover custom, Jesus broke the silence by interpreting the

significance of the bread in terms of his own person – in the Aramaic he’s saying “this is my person, myself, my whole being” [even in the Greek it’s *soma* being]. Here in verse 22 he is speaking both of the offering of his body as a sacrifice on the cross and also of a pledge of his personal presence with his followers that was to be recalled whenever they broke bread together.

Following the main meal (cf. 1 Cor. 11:25), the head of the household rose again from his reclining position and exhorted those present to “Speak praises to our God, to whom belongs what we have eaten,” to which those present replied, “Praised be our God for the food we have eaten.” With his right hand he then took the third cup of red wine mixed with water, and with his eyes on the cup pronounced the prayer of thanksgiving on behalf of all, with the concluding words: “May the All-merciful One make us worthy of the days of the Messiah and of the life of the world to come. He brings the salvation of his king. He shows covenant-faithfulness to his Anointed, to David and to his seed forever. He makes peace in his heavenly places. May he secure peace for us and for all Israel. And say you, Amen.”

Jesus’ saying in verse 24 relates the third cup wine to the making of a new covenant between God and his people as Luke’s account of the Last Supper as Luke’s Gospel and the earliest account of the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 11 make completely clear. The allusion in the red wine to his coming violent death is unmistakable as is the appropriateness of the normal words accompanying the third cup securing peace with God. God had promised through his prophets (Jeremiah 31:31-33) to establish a new and better covenant with his people and now that day was to arrive through Jesus’ action and the passion it speaks of. In ancient times, covenants were always sealed through the shedding of blood and this New Covenant would be no exception, it would be sealed in the blood of Christ.

The latter part of Jesus’ words in verse 24 explain the wonderful words of prophecy from Isaiah chapter 53 verse 5:

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5 NIV)

and also verse 12:

“Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” (Isaiah 53:12 NIV)

The “many” are the whole community of believers – all of us here this evening – whose sins are born and carried away through Christ’s blood.

Not only do Jesus’ actions at the Last Supper herald the New Covenant and our redemption from our sins, but express his promise to be with us as we celebrate the Eucharist.

Jesus’ words of promise were confirmed in verse 25 with a solemn oath that he would not share the fourth and final cup of the Passover until the meal was resumed and completed following Jesus’ second coming. He’s saying that his commitment to the way of the cross is absolute and final. Jesus is promising to drink the bitter cup of wrath of the Father, but, he’s also anticipating the messianic banquet when the Passover fellowship with his followers will be renewed in the Kingdom of God. Then Jesus will drink the wine “new”. Here, newness is the mark of the finally redeemed world and the time of ultimate redemption. The reference to “that day” envisions the second coming, and the triumph of the Son of Man.

The cup from which Jesus abstained was the fourth, which ordinarily concluded the Passover fellowship. The significance of this can be appreciated from the fact that the four cups of wine were interpreted in terms of the four-fold promise of redemption set forth in Exod. 6:6–7: “I will bring you out ... I will rid you of their bondage ... I will redeem you ... I will take you for my people and I will be your God” (TJ *Pesachim* X. 37b). Jesus had used the third cup, associated with the promise of redemption, to refer to his atoning death on behalf

of all believers. The cup which he refused was the cup of consummation, associated with the promise that God will take his people to be with him. This is the cup which Jesus will drink with his own in the messianic banquet which brings in the saving age to come. Jesus hasn't yet concluded his Passover fellowship with us.

So, at this Last Supper, Jesus was promising to drink the bitter cup of the Father's wrath, he was promising to go to the cross to redeem us from our sins. Until he comes again he's promising to be with us in and through the sacrament of the Eucharist and he's promising to drink the fourth cup of wine with us in the Kingdom of God following the Second Coming.

What an amazing set of promises to encapsulate in a few words. What amazing love to suffer and die for our sins, to redeem us and justify us before the Father. Amazing faithfulness to be with us every time we share round his table – including this evening. Finally, what an amazing promise to share the cup of blessing with us in our eternal life in the kingdom of God.

Friends, this Easter-time let's renew our commitment to Jesus – or make a new and firm commitment if we've never done that – and renew our commitment to the amazing promises he's made to us. And in the light of his amazing sacrifice which has secured the forgiveness of our sins and saved us from death and because of all the other promises he's made to us let's take up our cross, each one of us, and follow our Lord and Saviour this Easter and forevermore. Amen.