

*Readings*

2 Kgs 4:42-44

Ps 145:10-11, 15-16, 17-18

Eph 4:1-6

Jn 6:1-15

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In the coming weeks the liturgy is focused on the reading from the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John. In this section John waxes about Jesus as the Bread of Life and he lays out his theology of the Eucharist. These next few weeks offer us an opportunity to learn the history of our Eucharistic celebration and, it is hoped, to better understand why we do what we do.

Let's start with the Last Supper. It was at the Last Supper that Jesus instituted the Eucharist; he commanded his disciples to repeat this ritual in memory of him. The Gospels do not agree whether the Last Supper was a Passover meal. Mark, Matthew and Luke believe it was, but John offers a different timeline. While there may be a discussion about why the Gospels do not agree on this point, it seems certain that the early Christians did view it as a Passover meal. The Passover meal was (and still is) a once-a-year celebration that commemorates the great act of God to free the people from slavery in Egypt and set them on the path to the Promised land. This was a seminal event for the Jewish people that marked them as God's Chosen Ones. It seems that Jesus chose this event because his mission as our Savior mirrors that action of God – through his sacrifice he takes us from the slavery of sin to the Promised Land of heaven.

Let's take a look at the Last Supper as a Passover Meal because in doing so we can see the skeletal structure of our Eucharistic celebration which we call The Mass. The essential

ingredients of the Passover are: saltwater, bitter herbs, unleavened bread, lamb, three cups of wine at each place and the Cup of Blessing which was shared by all. The saltwater is to remind the Jewish people of the tears they shed during their time of slavery in Egypt. The bitter herbs recalled the sorrow and pain that was suffered under the rule of Pharaoh. During the meal the participants would dip the herbs in the saltwater. There were plates of unleavened bread which served as a reminder that the Jewish people were in a hurry to leave Egypt and had no time to let bread rise as they would do in usual circumstances. Next to the bread was a dip made of crushed apples, dates, nuts and cinnamon to remind them of the bricks they made while slaves in Egypt. Roasted lamb was the main course of the meal. At the time of Jesus, someone would have taken the lamb to the Temple in Jerusalem earlier in the day and a priest of the Temple would have slit the throat of the lamb. For ancient peoples the sign of blood is the true sign of a sacrifice and so the lamb was now consecrated to God. The priest would take a portion of the lamb and put it in a fire so that it could become a holocaust – a sacrifice that was pleasing to God. While sitting at the table, Jesus was well aware that he soon would be the Lamb of God, the true sacrifice. Lastly the cups of wine are symbols of the joy of the human spirit at the experience of freedom.

The meal itself was a ritual with distinct prayers and actions. It started with a toast to God. The participants would raise the first cup of wine and thank God for the gifts of creation and salvation. The people around the table would recite one of the Psalms of praise from the Bible. During this first part of the meal they also would have recalled the deeds of the Lord that happened on the first Passover. Psalm 136 recounts the history of the Jewish people and would have been recited at this juncture. In our celebration of Eucharist we read selections of the Bible before we consecrate the bread and wine to do as our Jewish brothers and sisters have done, to remind us of God's saving work.

The next phase of the Passover was the blessing of the bread and its distribution. Jesus was reciting the normal prayers of the ritual which we still use today: “Blessed are you Lord God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life.” At this point Jesus did something dramatic! He took the bread and told his disciples that this bread was his body which would be given up for them. He then broke the bread and gave it to them. While it is not obvious to us, it certainly should have been obvious to the disciples that Jesus was using a special language that signified he was making a covenant or a contract with them. This was a covenant in the spirit of the covenants that God had made with Abraham and Moses. It meant a major shift in the relationship between God and man.

The main part of the meal would take place next with the eating of the lamb and the dipping of the bread and herbs while drinking the second cup of wine. While this is normally a joyful moment of the meal it was at this juncture that Jesus announced that one of his disciples would betray him. We are all familiar with the outburst of Peter who swore he would not betray Jesus and then the prediction of Peter’s denial. We also can remember how Jesus identified his betrayer to one of the disciples by saying, “He is the one who has dipped his bread in the dish.” After the lamb had been eaten then came the Cup of Blessing which was a large vessel that would be shared by everyone at the meal. Jesus said the standard ritual prayers: “Blessed are you Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It will become for us our spiritual drink.” Then as Jesus did with the bread, he broke the ritual and said, “Take and drink. This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness

of sins. Do this in memory of me.” If some of the disciples did not understand at the breaking of the bread that this was the making of a new covenant between God and man, they couldn’t miss it now. According to ancient custom in order to have a covenant or a contract or a testament it was essential to have the breaking in half of a sacrificial animal through the spilling of blood.

At the end of the meal the participants would sing songs usually derived from the Book of Psalms

In this Last Supper meal that Jesus had with his followers he established a new ritual that would commemorate a new Exodus, a new setting free. This one would end the separation that existed between God and man.

The early Christians from the time of the Resurrection remained faithful to the command of Jesus and turned this from a one-a-year event into a ritual that could be celebrated frequently (which we will talk more about in the coming weeks).

In the Last Supper we see the framework of our Mass: an initial greeting or toast, a recalling of the deeds of God by the reading of the Scriptures, prayers of thanksgiving to God for the gifts of bread and wine, the reenactment of the breaking of the bread and the words of consecration for the cup of wine, the distribution of the Eucharist so that we can all participate, and then prayers and songs.

Therefore, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes again.